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# Chapter 3: How to manage your relationships at work as an in-house lawyer

## **1. Introduction**

This chapter is about applying the tools, principles and models above in your day-to-day practice of law in-house. How you apply these will depend on the decisions you have taken regarding your personal PSB, your assessment of the PSB of your employer client (employer client PSB) and how those two PSBs are interdependent for you. The more time you invest in these foundational steps, the more return you will receive in personal growth, fulfilment and success – whatever you decide success means to you. From this strong personal foundation, you will do your best work for your employer client, for its stakeholders and for society. You will approach your practice of law in-house consciously and not unconsciously. Your application of the tools in your relationships will be mindful. In the dysfunctional world you operate in, mindfulness is your ally, unconscious behaviour your enemy.

The practice of law in-house is your core business. The success of your practice depends on the quality of your relationships. The



quality of your relationships is a function of your investment in them. To this end, I have developed a relationship grid (see below) which I have used not only with CEOs, NEDs, other directors and GCs but also those starting their careers or in mid-career. In-house lawyers at all stages of their careers have used my relationship grid concept and associated tools for many years. Some create a grid on paper or a spreadsheet; many do it in their heads. The aspect of the grid that grabs their attention most is applying a red, amber or green (RAG) status to each of their relationships. This is because they are familiar with the RAG system on their risk registers. They see the relationship grid as a personal risk register. In this chapter, I describe the grid and what to do when your relationships go from green to amber or red. Problems include conflicts within the legal team; conflicts with the organisation that impact on all parties; conflicts between the legal function and the executive or main board; and independence issues. In this chapter, I also set out how you might approach the first 100 days of a new role.

In respect of relationships, you may find this quote from the Mental Health Foundation useful:

*Relationships are one of the most important aspects of our lives, yet we can often forget just how crucial our connections with others are for our physical and mental health and wellbeing.*

*People who are more socially connected to family, friends, or their community are happier, physically healthier, and live longer, with fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected.*

*It's not just the number of friends you have, and it's not whether or not you're in a committed relationship, but the quality of your close relationships that matters. Living in conflict or within a toxic relationship is more damaging than being alone.*

*As a society and as individuals, we must urgently prioritise investing in building and maintaining good relationships and tackling the*

*barriers to forming them. Failing to do so is equivalent to turning a blind eye to the impact of smoking and obesity on our health and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>*

## **2. Your first 100 days**

Your first 100 days in a new role are special because you can't – obviously, but not always remembered – have a second first 100 days in the same role. These are unique days. They start with hopes and fears. You hope that all will be well and so do they. By 'they', I mean the people who hired you. They will be as nervous as you are. You will fear that you've made a mistake and so will they. But the bigger burden is on you. The view formed of you by others, the quality of those early relationships formed and your reputation generally will, by the end of the 100 days, be difficult to change by you. You will make irrevocable first impressions in your first key email, first meeting, first follow-up actions and especially in your first decision. The good news is that you will have a clean sheet to write a new chapter in your career, in your life and in theirs.

You will have a fresh opportunity to present whatever face you choose. You can decide what of your previous behaviour you will continue, what you will stop and what new behaviour you will try to adopt. Spend time reviewing the highlights and lowlights of your previous role. What went well and why? What, if you had the time back again, would you do differently? It reminds me of when I changed schools at age 15. I had been very unhappy at my previous school. I was young and socially immature for my age. I had no guidance day to day in a boarding school in which thuggery and kindness were present in equal measure. The new school was bigger and a better environment for me, but the key change for me was to start afresh as I meant to continue.

Remember that they – the jury – will stay out for variable lengths of time. I have facilitated scores of first 100 days programmes. I find that, on average, you will probably encounter your first amber or red relationship by Day 15. On one occasion, a client who had just started a new role as chief operating officer (COO) encountered a red

*When the jury comes in on your first 100 days, you're stuck with their decision. It will be impossible to lodge an appeal. So, make the best of this honeymoon period.*

relationship in his grid by Day 5 because a decision which was taken before he arrived caused a serious risk event in his first week and was now his responsibility. He said that, since he didn't know his colleagues or the politics of the relationships between them, he felt stuck as to how best to proceed, whom to trust and to whom he should give a wide berth. I suggested he ask his CEO to advise him how to proceed and with whom. But could he trust his CEO? Well, if he couldn't, it seemed to me, he shouldn't have taken the job in the first place. He got through the problem. It struck me at the time, and since, the extent to which senior people can feel alone among colleagues. Sometimes this is unavoidable but often people are afraid to take the risk of asking for help from colleagues for fear of being rejected by them or showing weakness. It's worth the risk. As one therapist said to me: "If someone rejects you, it's a statement about them, not about you." But you may be pleasantly surprised to find that others are happy to help you, not least because they feel alone themselves. So be prepared to encounter troublesome relationships and to take risks from Day 1. When the jury comes in on your first 100 days, you're stuck with their decision. It will be impossible to lodge an appeal. So, make the best of this honeymoon period. Here are seven steps to reduce risks and maximise your opportunities in your first 100 days:

- **Step 1:** Be clear on your personal purpose in life and at work before Day 1. If you're not, you will be in trouble before you start and you won't know why. Your new colleagues will be quick to project an assumed and often erroneous purpose onto you if you don't get in there first with yours.
- **Step 2:** Listen 70% of the time. Ask lots of open biased questions: who? What? When? Where? How? By 'biased', I mean biased towards surfacing information that will help you populate your relationship grid.
- **Step 3:** Demonstrate through your actions – don't assert – how your personal purpose links to the purpose of the legal function within the organisation and to the purpose of the organisation – assuming that the latter is clear, which it often isn't. Do your best. The interdependence of these purposes will make or break your first 100 days.
- **Step 4:** Communicate clearly what you intend to deliver in your

first 100 days and make sure you under-promise and over-deliver.

- **Step 5:** Take this unique opportunity to make small changes in your behaviour based on your review of your last role.
- **Step 6:** Never send a material email or text before you speak to the recipient. Never. Ever. You're not Tolstoy. Your former colleagues might have come to tolerate your telegraphic/florid/bland writing style over the years. Your new colleagues won't.
- **Step 7:** When you encounter your first amber or red relationship, work through your feelings, your needs in relation to those feelings and your options on how to handle the amber or red – ideally with a third party (see Feel/Need/Do in Chapter 1). How you deal with your first amber/red encounter will define your reputation and your first 100 days. Your new colleagues will judge you more on how you dealt with your relationships and less on what you delivered. Your character will be judged on how others felt when you interacted with them.

*In extremis*, you can decide to leave your new job at the end of your first 100 days without too much damage. We all make mistakes. Better to take that tough decision than when the market will understand. Otherwise, and ideally, you should stay at least two years in a role or risk losing credibility in the job market. An even tougher decision is for your new employer to accept that they made a mistake in hiring you and ask you to leave before the end of your first 100 days. This is rare. I find that more hiring mistakes are made by hirers than by applicants. How many people in your organisation do you feel were poor hiring decisions? Why? Your answer will be as much a statement about you as about them.

This is an extract from the chapter 'How to manage your relationships at work as an in-house lawyer' by Ciarán Fenton in *The Modern In-house Lawyer: Optimising Relationships for Growth and Success in an ESG Environment*, published by Globe Law and Business.

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