

Five Years at the Helm: How Firm Leadership Made Me a Better Outside Counsel

By Katya Jestin

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As an Assistant United States Attorney in the Criminal Division of the Eastern District of New York, I stood in courtrooms prosecuting organized crime leaders. Those cases demanded clarity, resilience, and the ability to lead high-stakes matters under public scrutiny. At the time, I assumed that would be the most defining challenge of my professional life.

I was wrong. Five years as co-managing partner of Jenner & Block shaped me just as profoundly—perhaps more so. Leading a major law firm during a period of unprecedented change, beginning with the COVID-19 pandemic, provided a perspective that has made me a more creative and more pragmatic outside counsel for my clients today.

Beyond the Courtroom: Understanding the Full Picture

Leadership fundamentally expanded how I approach problems. As co-managing partner, my responsibilities extended far beyond individual cases and clients. I became accountable



Courtesy photo

Katya Jestin is co-chair of Jenner & Block's Investigations, Compliance, and Defense Practice. Based in New York, she served as the firm's co-managing partner from January 2020 through December 2024.

for the health of an entire institution: hundreds of professional staff and lawyers, complex finances and important financial targets, and the firm's long-term strategic direction during turbulent times.

This experience sharpened my appreciation for the pressures General Counsels face daily—

constantly balancing legal risk against business imperatives, managing multiple stakeholders, and supporting teams operating under relentless pressure and budget constraints. Today, when I advise a General Counsel navigating a government investigation, regulatory inquiry, high-stakes litigation, or reputational crisis, I bring a more nuanced understanding of the practical realities and pressures surrounding every legal decision. I've been in their shoes; I have experienced the weight of institutional responsibility.

The Power of Consensus in Crisis

Leadership deepened my conviction that consensus-building isn't merely helpful—it's essential. Guiding a partnership through crisis requires humility. It requires listening carefully and actively, surfacing diverse perspectives, and forging common ground that people can genuinely unite behind. I learned to see consensus not as an impediment to swift decision making, but as the foundation that makes decisions stick.

This skill proves invaluable in my practice. When working with companies responding to high-stakes legal challenges, building alignment among executives, board members, and legal teams often determines whether an organization can move forward with confidence. Outside counsel must do more than deliver sound legal advice—we must help clients create the necessary internal consensus with their stakeholders. This means understanding a client's business imperatives and working to align those imperatives with the challenges at hand.

Trust Through Transparency

Effective leadership requires trust. Building trust requires listening and then communicating with both transparency and empathy. During periods of uncertainty at the firm, colleagues needed more than direction—they needed reassurance that their concerns were heard and valued.

These lessons translate directly to client work. General Counsels answer to internal clients and are under constant pressure and scrutiny. Outside counsel is most effective when she sees the bigger picture, understands the client and its business goals, and forms a strategic partnership with the General Counsel to assist her in addressing the legal challenges effectively both externally and internally.

Values as Strategy

My tenure reinforced that values and strategy are inseparable. Jenner's \$250 million pro bono commitment, made in the throes of the pandemic and achieved well ahead of schedule, demonstrated how aligning operations with core values can simultaneously strengthen culture and enhance reputation.

I bring this same perspective to client counseling. Organizations facing existential challenges—impacting everything from reputation to the bottom line—are best served when they approach these challenges strategically, accounting for all risks while doubling down on their organizational values. The most resilient organizations use these moments to reinforce their credibility, strengthen governance, and deepen their culture.

Looking Beyond the Immediate Crisis

Running a firm demanded forward-looking planning: anticipating industry shifts, evaluating emerging markets, and balancing strategic investment with prudent caution. This discipline now shapes my approach to client service.

I partner with General Counsels not only to respond to immediate legal demands, but also to help them prepare for what's coming next—whether it is evolving enforcement priorities, heightened compliance expectations, or shifting stakeholder pressures. My subsequent experience as a DOJ-appointed compliance monitor reinforced this perspective, showing me how organizational culture and internal controls determine whether risks are contained or amplified. Today, I draw on both experiences to help clients stress-test their systems before problems emerge.

The Leadership Advantage

Returning to full-time practice confirmed how complementary leadership and client service truly are. Sitting in the co-managing partner's chair gave me a deep appreciation for making consequential decisions with multiple constituencies in mind while under significant pressure. It reminded me how critical it is to bring people along, forge genuine agreement, and ensure everyone is invested in the path forward.

That experience has made me a more effective partner to my clients—providing counsel that is legally rigorous, commercially realistic, and deeply attentive to the human dynamics that ultimately drive outcomes.

From Prosecution to Partnership to Practice

The through line connecting prosecuting organized crime, leading a major law firm, and counseling corporate clients is consistent: understanding complexity, exercising sound judgment under pressure, and supporting people strategically through their most difficult professional moments. Leadership broadened my perspective on what this requires and sharpened my ability to build the consensus and trust that make meaningful progress possible.

This January, I returned to my practice with renewed focus on helping companies and their legal departments navigate challenges with clarity, strategic foresight, and careful balance—lessons learned not just in courtrooms, but in boardrooms where the real decisions that shape institutions are made.

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