

# PUBLICATION

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## Interview with Sarah Powell, Executive Vice President, General Counsel and Secretary of Focus Brands

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**Tell us about some of the leadership positions you held in your career and how you achieved those positions.**

My first true leadership position was as an assistant general counsel (AGC) at Delhaize America after serving as a staff attorney for the five years prior. As the AGC, I oversaw all of the real estate transactions, litigation, contractual matters, and other miscellaneous matters, including significant acquisitions.

After several years at Delhaize, I moved to Advance Auto Parts as a director level senior attorney. I oversaw all real estate transactional and litigation matters, engaged in contract negotiations, and led mergers and acquisitions. I was fortunate enough that my employer sent me to a one-year women's leadership program, which included an incredibly enlightening 360-degree analysis of how other employees at the company saw me. The analysis, along with techniques I learned in the program, strengthened my leadership capabilities. As my role with acquisitions increased and the legal department grew, I was promoted to vice president. I gained invaluable experience in managing a team during this time, learning what did and did not work well in keeping people engaged as part of the team.

When the general counsel left the company, I was appointed as the acting general counsel, and they began the search for the new general counsel. I learned as much as I could about the position, and I knew I needed to use my new position to gain experience in securities and employment law. In addition, I took on litigation matters that I had not been involved in before, prioritized cases, and reduced legal expenses. I also worked with the team of my peers, who were suddenly reporting to me, to make our roles easier by eliminating silos on the team. After a few months, I threw my hat in the ring for general counsel and obtained the position based upon my performance and leadership assessments conducted by the company. At various times as the senior vice president, general counsel and secretary, I managed teams of 20 – 100 people, drawing upon my prior management experience and learning new leadership techniques to keep the teams engaged.

I was the senior vice president, general counsel and corporate secretary at Advance Auto Parts for six years before transitioning to my current role as executive vice president, general counsel and secretary at Focus Brands three years ago. I obtained the Focus Brands role following a call from a recruiter. At Focus Brands, I am part of the executive team and play an important role in guiding the direction of our business. I continue to learn and refine leadership techniques every day.

**How do you put together your ideal legal team? Does diversity play a role?**

The first thing I search for in a member of our legal team is solid knowledge of the legal area or areas in which the team member will interact with the business. Once I confirm that, I focus on the person's fit with the legal team and the company's business teams. I search for people who are interested in honing their legal skills as well as learning about the business and incorporating that learning into their legal decisions. In addition, I search for people who are collaborative, have integrity, and are open to questions and challenges from our business people. If an attorney is arrogant or believes that they know all the answers, that person is not a good

fit for our company. Diversity definitely plays a role in putting together the ideal team. Diversity of the people within the team contributes to more diverse and innovative ideas and solutions for the team, and strengthens the team's results.

### **Are there any real "don'ts" when it comes to working your way up the corporate or professional ladder?**

- Don't underestimate yourself. Take on challenges that cause you to be uncomfortable. That is the best way to grow, even if you fail at a challenge sometimes.
- Don't always talk. Take the time to listen to what others are saying, and make sure you take their viewpoints into account, too.
- Don't go too far into the weeds when you are talking with senior leaders as you work your way up the corporate ladder. Keep your points concise and at a high level.

### **What are the top three pieces of advice you would give to an aspiring female professional?**

1. Always keep learning new areas of your professional specialty and continue learning about your business.
2. Keep up with new developments in the business world, and read the *Wall Street Journal* and business journals.
3. Don't be afraid to make a decision. The general counsel at my first in-house job at Delhaize America told me that not making a decision can often be far worse for you and the business than making a wrong decision that you can fix later.

### **Can you tell us about the attributes of the most successful relationships you have participated in as a mentor or mentee?**

- Both the mentor and the mentee listen sincerely to the other's concerns and recommendations.
- Honest feedback on performance and the viability of ideas.
- The mentor and the mentee prepare for their sessions to ensure they are as productive as possible.