

Culture Inside the Legal Department: Creating Environments Where People Stay and Thrive

California Minority Counsel Program 2026 Legal Department Diversity Summit

Date & Time: Friday, September 25, 2026, 2:45 pm – 4:00 pm

Title: Culture Inside the Legal Department: Creating Environments Where People Stay and Thrive

Session Description: S In today's highly competitive legal talent market, culture inside the legal department has become a critical driver of retention, engagement, innovation, and long-term success. Attorneys are increasingly seeking workplaces where they feel valued, supported, connected to purpose, and able to grow professionally without sacrificing well-being.

This interactive in-house counsel discussion will explore how legal department leaders are intentionally shaping cultures that attract and retain top talent while fostering collaboration, psychological safety, mentorship, accountability, and inclusion. Panelists will share practical strategies for building environments where attorneys across generations and backgrounds can thrive — even amid increasing workloads, evolving business demands (particularly around AI), hybrid work environments, and shifting expectations around leadership and workplace culture.

Attendees will gain candid insight into the leadership decisions, policies, communication practices, and cultural investments that help legal departments strengthen morale, reduce burnout, improve retention, and build stronger teams equipped for the future of the profession.

Panelists:

- Ankita Patel (Dole Packaged Foods)
- Yolanda Sanders (formerly Gap Inc.)
- Christophe Mosby (HP Inc.)
- Romi Akpala (Rivian and Volkswagen Group Technologies)

Moderator: Malavika Lobo (Gen Digital)

CA MCLE: 1.0 HR in General Credit

OUTLINE:

Subtopic 1: Culture Ownership and Integration

- Determine culture through observing norms, communication styles, and decision-making processes.
- Identify champions who can help navigate the organization.
- Leverage or create formal support programs or create informal relationships with champions.
- Integrate cross-functionally .

Subtopic 2: Relationship Building

- Proactively meet stakeholders throughout organization, not just in legal.
- Senior leaders can promote diverse voices in discussions.
- Practice transparency and collaboration.

Subtopic 3: Intentional Engagement

- Build network!
- Raise hand for work that aligns with long term goals.
- Create environment you want to see.

Subtopic 4: Strategic Presence and Assertive Communication

- Speak up, ask questions, and show judgement.
- Know when to take strategic risks and leadership roles.
- Understand environment so you know who to talk to and when.

RESOURCES AND CITATIONS

I. In-House Leadership & Legal Department Culture

Ben W. Heineman Jr. – *The Inside Counsel Revolution: Resolving the Partner-Guardian Tension*

American Bar Association (2016)

Its chapters include "The Cultural Imperative" and "Leading the Law Department." It is the best fit for the tension between being a business partner and guardian of the company.

Available at: [ABA Web Store](#)

ACC Well-being Toolkit for In-house Lawyers (2nd edition)

Association of Corporate Counsel, with Latitude Legal

The second edition launched in May 2025 with refreshed content on team leadership, burnout prevention, and self-care. The updated toolkit has six checklists.

Available at: acc.com/wellbeingtoolkit

II. Attrition, Well-Being & the Employer's Role

"Losing Our [Best] Minds: Addressing the Attrition Crisis of Women Lawyers in a Post-Pandemic World"

California Lawyers Association & California Women Lawyers (Buchanan, Cleesattle, Goshtasbi; December 2022)

Its recommendations for legal employers cover flexible employment, well-being, leadership training and development, belonging, and accountability.

Available at: calawyers.org (PDF)

"The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change"

National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being (August 2017)

It contains 44 recommendations, with sections for specific stakeholders including legal employers.

Available at: [ABA Task Force page](#)

ABA Well-Being Pledge Campaign

American Bar Association

It calls on legal employers, including corporate entities, to support a seven-point framework, and signatories receive an annual recommitment form.

Available at: [ABA Pledge page](#)

III. Psychological Safety, Engagement & Team Effectiveness

Amy C. Edmondson – *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*

Wiley (2018)

It gives practical guidance on building teams where people can speak up without fear.

Available at: [Wiley](#) | [Harvard Business School](#) [Wiley](#)

Google re:Work – "Understand Team Effectiveness" (Project Aristotle)

Google found that the most effective teams were those where members feel safe to take risks, ask questions, and offer new ideas. The guide includes tools for fostering that.

Available at: rework.withgoogle.com [LinkedIn](#)

Anne Brafford – *Positive Professionals: Creating High-Performing, Profitable Firms Through the Science of Engagement*

American Bar Association (2017)

It makes a business case that greater engagement improves well-being, retention, productivity, and client satisfaction.

Available at: [ABA Web Store](#) [American Bar Association](#)

Krieger & Sheldon – "What Makes Lawyers Happy? A Data-Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success"

83 Geo. Wash. L. Rev. 554 (2015)

Money- and status-related factors had little association with lawyer well-being, while internal and psychological factors mattered most.

Available at: [SSRN](#) | [FSU open-access copy](#) [SSRN](#)

IV. Legal Standards & Practical Compliance Tools

California Rules of Professional Conduct (rules 1.13, 5.1–5.3, 8.4.1)

State Bar of California

The current rules took effect November 1, 2018. The State Bar also lists later amendments, such as new rule 8.3 effective August 1, 2023, so check the current text.

Available at: [Current Rules page](#) | [Full rules \(PDF\)](#) [CA](#)

Harassment Prevention Guide (2025 edition)

California Civil Rights Department

It helps employers understand their obligations to prevent and correct unlawful harassment, including the written-policy requirement under Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 11023. CRD also offers free online sexual harassment prevention training that meets the state's biennial requirement.

Available at: [Guide \(PDF\)](#) | [CRD notice on the free training](#) [caca](#)

Evaluation of Corporate Compliance Programs

U.S. Department of Justice, Criminal Division

The September 2024 update added questions on whether company practices encourage or chill employee reports of misconduct. The version linked below is that update. Check the DOJ compliance page for anything newer.

Available at: [ECCP \(PDF\)](#) | [DOJ Criminal Division compliance page](#) [Morgan Lewis](#)