



Reflections of a CLO: An interview with Mark Roellig

Recently, I sat down with Mark Roellig to talk about his career, the lessons he's learned, and his thoughts about the path forward for the legal profession. Roellig is an executive that most recently served as the chief technology officer of MassMutual, and chief legal officer before that. His career also included chief legal officer roles at three other public companies, including Fisher Scientific International Inc., StorageTek, and US WEST. Over the course of these positions, Roellig had responsibility for a wide range of functions, including human resources, administrative services, corporate strategy, compliance, public policy, public relations, executive travel, claims, real estate, facilities, information technology systems and architecture, cyber and information security, and strategic technology investments. If you ask Roellig, he calls it "wandering corporate America," and he credits his success entirely to the teams he's had the opportunity and privilege to lead.

Beyond his professional credentials, Roellig has a list of accomplishments that don't typically get put on a resume: He's been married for 30 years; he's mentored and sponsored dozens of his direct reports into general counsel or chief legal officer roles; and he's long been a champion of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

But just because Roellig is retired doesn't mean he's stopped focusing his sights on the future. Today, Roellig actively coaches and mentors sitting executives—primarily CLOs, but an occasional CEO, too—on strategy, leadership, and business acumen. Roellig, a frequent writer and speaker, narrows his focus to three primary pieces of advice for leaders as he scans the horizon and thinks about what law practice may look like for current and aspiring leaders: Be intentional about developing your leadership skills, invest in your team, and care for your own well-being and the well-being of others.





Leadership

To Roellig, leadership is something that may be innate for some, but can be developed, honed, and evolve for most. "In a corporate setting, leadership involves the assembling, developing, focusing, and inspiring of others to effectively achieve objectives to advance the overall values, vision, mission, and strategy of the business," says Roellig. Leadership is your personal journey, and your ability to develop in this regard requires that you spend time knowing yourself and understanding what it might be like for others to experience working with you.

More specifically, Roellig recommends three areas of focus for aspiring leaders:

Develop and share your personal leadership philosophy.

Some might call this building a legacy, but no matter what you call it, it's important for aspiring leaders to clearly identify what they believe and want to leave behind. "Defining the impact you want to have on others and taking the time to write it down can help a leader choose how best to spend their time," says Roellig. Otherwise, you may lift your head in 10 or even 20 years and see that, even if you've been successful in some capacity, you may not have fulfilled the goals you set for yourself. Time is a critical resource for executives, and having a deep-rooted leadership philosophy or guiding principles can help you prioritize your interests. "Time is your most precious resource, you can't buy more, you can't fast-forward, and you certainly can't rewind," says Roellig. "How you spend your time is important to your happiness, and it is a demonstration to others who you are and what you value. We all should be asking ourselves, 'is the way we are spending our time aligned with what we truly value?' If not, fix it!"

Roellig says that his leadership philosophy reflects what he believes, what he expects, what he will do, and what he will not tolerate. His philosophy is centered on the value of teaming, and he spends much of his time focused on creating the environment that empowers a strong team.

Invest in continual self-improvement.

Roellig's advice may seem obvious, but according to an analysis of 360-degree review data¹ for legal executives, practicing self-development is neither something lawyers do well, nor is it highly valued by their peers, direct reports, or leaders. In fact,

self-development was ranked 12 out of 16 in legal executives' competency and 15 out of 16 in importance by the raters. In many cases, Roellig says, lawyers simply have not been prompted to invest in their own development. Notwithstanding this data, Roellig insists that continual improvement and learning are critically important.

Roellig's vision for self-improvement is much more than the typical CLE. It encompasses building teamwork, emotional intelligence, communication, and strong listening skills. Of course, the competent attorney must know their technical field of expertise, but—says Roellig—they should also "be curious, interested, and open to learning about new ideas and different ways of thinking and exploring the what-ifs that present themselves in most business environments." Roellig believes it was this curiosity that opened the door to his chief technology officer role at MassMutual. He knows it's not often that a lawyer is invited to lead the enterprise's technology function. While it was challenging, he says he went into the role open to learning from the very competent team that was in place and leveraging his inquisitive and analytical mindset (his undergraduate degree is in mathematics) to help him get up to speed quickly.

Roellig also believes that receiving feedback and listening are part of the self-improvement process. He believes that when most people are talking, others are just waiting to say what they want to say and not actively listening. He says, "Some leaders are deaf to feedback; some create an environment where the clear message is that feedback is not welcome. Both are mistakes." He has noted that some executives he has worked with view suggestions or feedback in their area of responsibility as a personal attack and, therefore, are immediately defensive and shut down when receiving such information. "You don't have to agree with the feedback,



but you should hear it, consider it, and, in most cases, act on it. At the very least, you must create an environment where your team and others feel comfortable giving you feedback, and that's not easy," Roellig comments. Advancing your leadership expertise without the feedback of others is like trying to navigate in the fog.

Make DEI a priority.

Roellig recalls his parents being advocates for civil rights when he was a child. He learned then that it would be important for him to use his voice to further this cause—and he has. Roellig says he has never missed an opportunity to note the importance of diverse teams on performance and he understands the connection that inclusion plays on this success. He says, "Diversity and inclusion are the noun and the verb. You

need both, and you must create inclusion through your actions, your words, and the culture you lead so that diversity of thoughts, opinions, ideas, and experiences can provide positive value to the team and to the enterprise."

Roellig expects his team to be all-in, too. Roellig requires that his leaders make DEI part of their objectives, and this includes supporting and attending events and participating in panels. But, he says, it goes even further. Roellig is clear that open positions are filled only after a diverse slate of candidates are considered by a diverse group of interviewers. DEI performance is part of each individual's annual review process and tied to compensation decisions.

Roellig feels it is important to view DEI not as an "extracurricular" activity, but a key element of an enterprise's overall strategy.

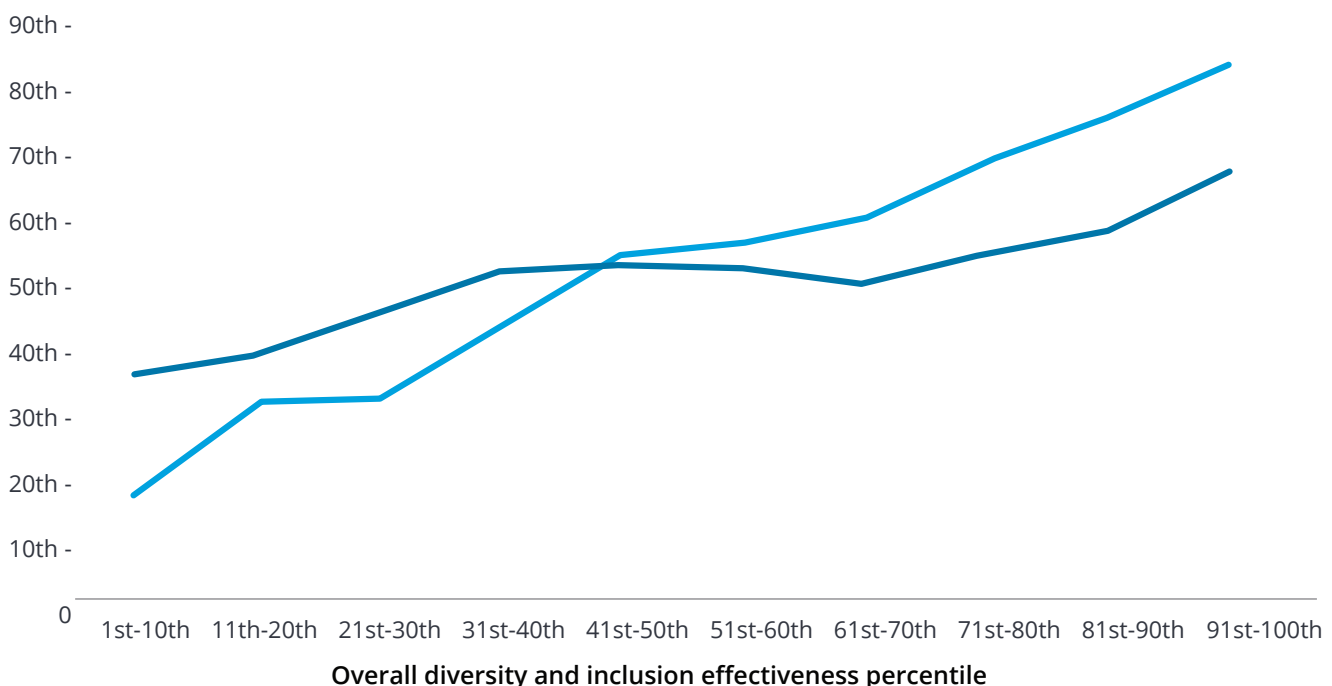
Roellig says he is the first to admit he doesn't have it all figured out, though. He acknowledges that his priorities in the DEI space are the result of experiential learning he's had over the years—actual interactions, exchanges, and opportunities to experience the value that diversity brings to a team. Even though it may not be as easy, he says his goal is to intentionally surround himself with people who have had different experiences and have different perspectives. He just isn't entirely sure how to recreate that experiential opportunity for those who haven't had it or haven't made it a priority. "You need to find a way to have executives experience working with different people and realize they get a better result. Maybe working outside the legal function, in a different business or geography, is one way to go about it."

How leaders rate their inclusiveness vs. how employees see them

The worst leaders have a rosy view of themselves, while the best underrate their skills.

■ Self-rating ■ Direct report rating

Diversity and inclusion effectiveness percentile



Source: Zenger Folkman

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Team

"It is all about talent and teams—diverse teams, since you are only as good and successful as the company you keep," says Roellig, which means that hiring, supporting, and engaging a strong team are critically important. "If you are the smartest person in the room, you have a weak team." Roellig describes two options for leader and team dynamics: the hub-and-spoke model and the cloud model. In hub-and-spoke, everything is tied to the center, to the leader. All issues are driven into the center, and orders are pushed down through the spokes. If the leader has an issue or a question, they reach out to the contact on that topic, obtain the information, and make a decision. Sometimes the necessary information is conveyed to others through the spokes, but sometimes it isn't. To Roellig, this is a risky proposition because it concentrates too much control in one person and can create a bottleneck on decision-making or gaps in information.

The cloud model is more team-oriented; the team collectively decides which issues they own as a team, and decision-making on those issues is unbundled. One example could be talent. "The CFO should know who the high-potential talent in legal are, and the CLO should know the same in the finance function. Bonuses for direct reports for all cloud members should be discussed with the cloud team; this helps to establish parity in the organization and can help to diminish issues related to unconscious bias," says Roellig. He has also used this model to handle important legal issues and significant litigation. Roellig stresses that value of this model is that all decisions are made collectively, allowing the team to leverage its collective wisdom and enabling better decision-making. In this model, says Roellig, "it is important to listen. When smart people ask dumb questions, listen."

To be effective as a cloud model team member, Roellig has four tips:

Be sure you are spending the appropriate amount of time on strategic alignment to drive stronger engagement. Develop, document, and share clear objectives aligned with the business.

While such a focus can clearly impact the success of a legal executive, it also benefits the team to have clear objectives that are aligned to the business strategy. “If I ask one of my team members to go do a ‘good job,’ I often get average results as best. Their view of ‘good work’ is likely different than mine. Yet if I ask them to do a specific set of things, I often get those things plus a few more. It’s amazing what impact clarity of purpose can have on others,” Roellig explains.

But attention to strategic alignment is not something most executives spend enough time on. Deloitte data shows² that legal

executives aren’t spending as much time as they would like, and, as their CEO may expect, that they’re focused on high-level strategic and transformative issues (see callout box). Additionally, a 360-degree review research study shows³ that while legal executives are rated above average in the area of “strategic perspective,” they do poorly in the areas of “innovate” (rated 14 out of 16) and “champion change”⁴ (rated 11 out of 16). Roellig notes that leaders can have intense demands on their time, but dedicating time to strategic alignment is always time well spent.⁵

The time allocation challenge

Deloitte interviews with executive leaders indicate that most CEOs and boards want CLOs to spend the majority of their time—about 60% to 70%—on work that is strategic or transformative in nature, with just 30% to 40% in the more traditional lawyer function.

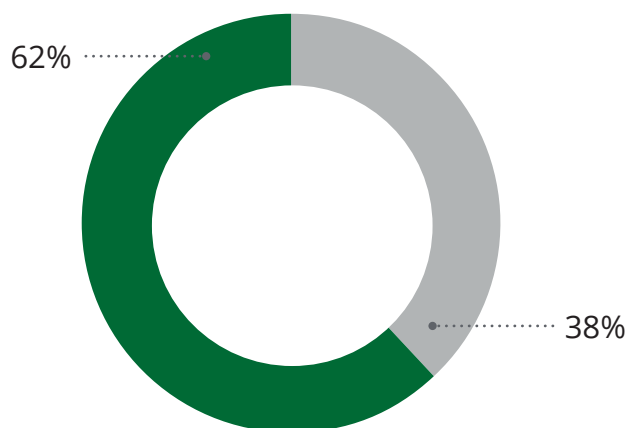
However, new CLOs report that their time allocation is often the reverse of CEO and board requests.

Even experienced CLOs sometimes find it difficult to align their time allocation to meet the expectations of the CEO and board. However, the difference between new and experienced CLOs seems to be the ability to spend less time on traditional work and contribute more to strategic and transformational endeavors.

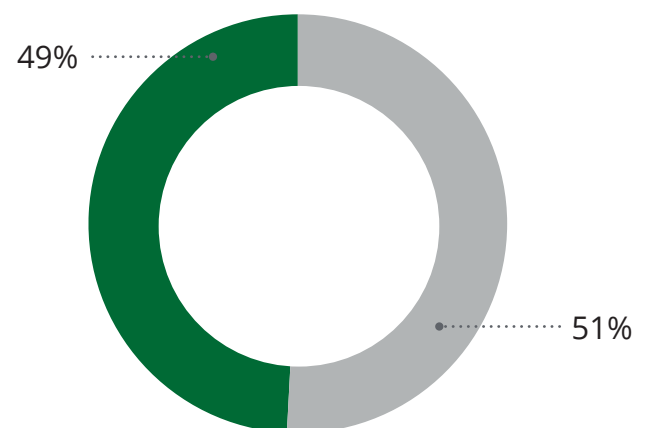
Current time spent

■ Traditional lawyer function ■ Strategic/transformative

New CLOs



Experienced CLOs



Source: Deloitte Chief Legal Officer Program

What Roellig told us that he often finds interesting is that some individuals tell him they are not ready to be a CLO yet because they are missing a particular area of legal expertise, and women express this concern more often than men, in his experience. For either, he says, this is misguided. “You can easily find others or ways to fill in for those competencies. What is more valuable is to have the skills to focus on strategy, team, and objectives.”

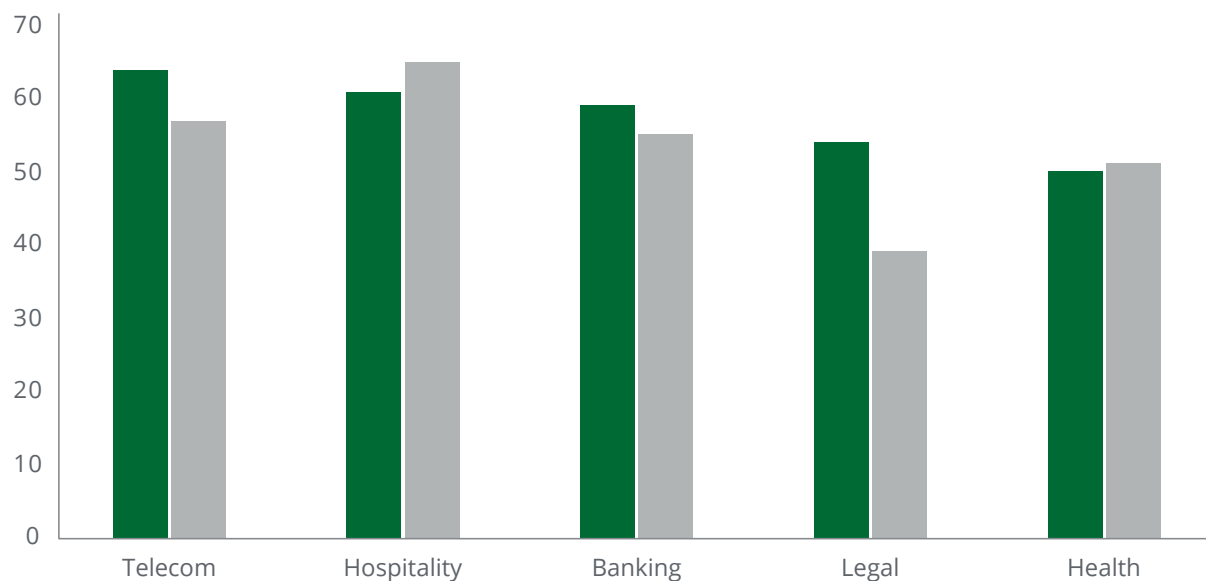
Roellig is clear that strategic planning must be forward-thinking: “A leader should anticipate and plan for the future. Not where the business is today, but where it is headed.” This requires a deep understanding of the business strategy, objectives, and tactics.

Studies have shown that engaged teams are more productive.⁶ Roellig has argued that boards should look at the engagement survey scores of all corporate leaders, including the CEO, adding that this is a critical data point on their performance and the performance of their teams. He has also noted that the teams that value and foster diversity and inclusion have higher engagement and engagement scores. He says, “If you want high levels of engagement, you must create a team that is diverse and inclusive.” Providing the appropriate level of strategic guidance is also a critical tool in keeping your team engaged.

Engagement is something legal isn’t doing well overall. Deloitte’s research on leadership and engagement shows that, for the five industries that score highest in overall leadership competency, legal has the largest gap between overall leadership score and employee engagement index score.⁷ Overall, of the 25 industries for which data is available, nine have a negative differential, and only legal has a double-digit negative differential—more than twice the next-highest negative differential of 7.2 (scores are based on scale of 1–100).

Leadership and employee engagement

■ Overall leadership ■ Employee engagement



Source: Deloitte, “[Chief legal officers and leadership](#),” November 2019.

Empower your team.

Roellig is an adamant proponent of technology-empowered lawyers. He says, “You must provide the latest technology and the appropriate resources if you expect your team to consistently deliver the best outcomes. As a leader, I was asking a lot of my team. For them to deliver on that ask, I knew I had to give them the tools they needed.” Roellig’s position on technology is consistent with many legal executives’ attitudes: Although slow to adopt technology, most understand the imperative, although there is a gap between attitudes and action for many legal departments.⁸

COVID-19 may be moving the needle more urgently on this point, however. A recent Deloitte survey of legal executives showed nearly two-thirds are focused on legal technology adoption in response to the increasing demands on their function as a result of COVID-19 and the continued remote working situation.⁹ But even before the pandemic, Roellig says that he never skimped on technology, recognizing that the way lawyers get work done was fundamentally shifting over the course of his career.

The combination of focused attention to autonomy, or the cloud model of leadership, and technology enablement are two of the most critical elements to a satisfied workforce according to Deloitte's Human Capital Trends Report 2019:

Many respondents perceived worker satisfaction to be low related to key aspects of work

How satisfied are employees in your organization with the design of their jobs (including the workflow and technologies)?

■ Not satisfied ■ Somewhat satisfied ■ Satisfied ■ Very satisfied

Autonomy to make decisions



Tools and technology



Note: Percentages may not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends survey, 2019.

It is Roellig's belief that every company is now a technology company. With this in mind, he thinks one area where CLOs can be forward thinking is in the area of Ethical Tech. Ethical Tech is focused on the relationship between diversity, technology, and human values; the decisions made toward technological advances; and the impacts those decisions can have. While it may be true that everyone has a part in the conversation on Ethical Tech, and everyone has a role to play and a stake in the outcomes, because of the focus on ethics and trust inherent in Ethical Tech conversations, CLOs should consider playing a leading role.

Technology holds incredible promise and potential to help solve some of the world's toughest problems, driving value in today's rapidly changing world. But, in order to realize the positive potential of a tech-enabled future, ethics and trust have to play leading roles right from the start, and they must be reinforced with rigorous consideration of privacy, security, and the ethical implications of the design, build, and operation of technology. CLOs might consider questions such as these:

- Can Ethical Tech risk be forecast?
- What is the appropriate cost-benefit analysis for tech development?
- Is there a system of incentives and accountability that balance Ethical Tech and tech quality?

Focusing on Ethical Tech isn't an exercise or a passing trend, and technology advances often outpace regulation around those advances. A forward-thinking CLO can take responsibility for leading the way as a trusted adviser, focused on building the future and dedicated to a proactive commitment to building technology that is trustworthy and ethical.

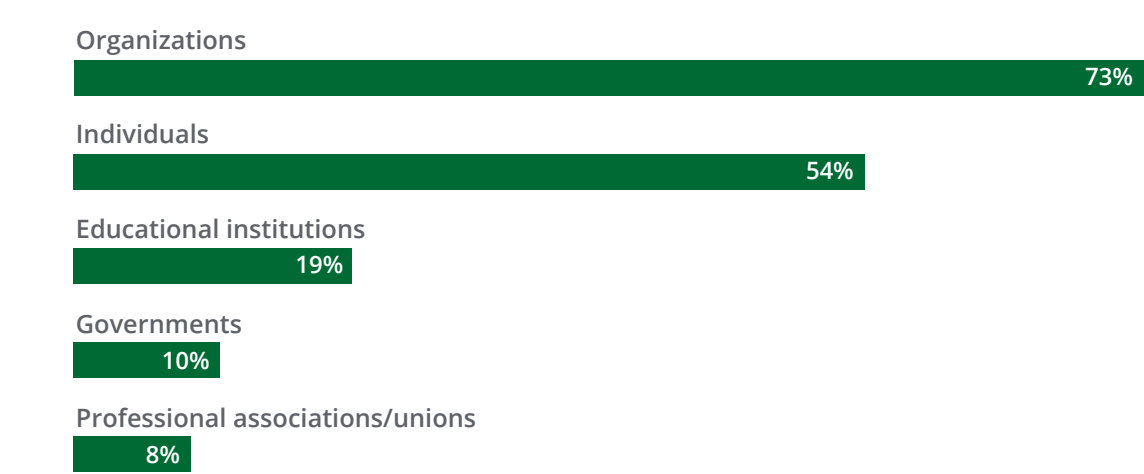
Source: [Deloitte Ethical Tech](#). See also [Ethical Tech Blog](#), January 2021 and December 2020.

Learning as team-building.

Roellig is a fan of formal team-building events. He'll tell you he enjoys bowling, laser tag, and cooking classes as much as anyone else, but he believes providing opportunities for the team to learn together is much more powerful. Roellig said he does not know whether this is because he is a naturally curious person (almost scientific in his interests) or perhaps because he empowers his team to ideate and be creative, but whatever the reason, learning has been a strong connection point for his teams. Roellig is an advocate of continuing to develop and improve skills that are critical for all lawyers and executives, including decision-making (judgment), communications, technology, and negotiation. Deloitte's data on talent supports this learning imperative. In 2019, learning and development was the top-rated human capital issue.¹⁰ In fact, for nearly a decade, learning has been a critical issue in the workplace,¹¹ and in 2020, most respondents identified the employer as the party most responsible for continued learning.¹²

More respondents identified organizations as the entity responsible for workforce development than identified any other stakeholder

Which entities in society do you think are primarily responsible for workforce development? Select up to two.



Source: Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends survey, 2020.



Roellig believes that the very nature of teams will be fundamentally different through and after the pandemic recovery, and, as a result, a continued emphasis on learning, development, leadership, and resilience will become even more important.

Recognize, reward, and provide feedback. Make tough decisions, fast.

Roellig says he has always been quick to recognize a job well done. “The power of positive reinforcement is so much stronger than the power of negative reinforcement. When you see things that are good, recognition and reward are critical. This is true with your team, your peers, and your boss. Tell your CEO that you appreciate and value the tough decisions they make.” Roellig doesn’t believe you have to wait for the annual review cycle, he thinks positive feedback should be shared immediately. The same is true where someone isn’t performing well. Roellig says “for individuals that are not doing a great job, you have to have tough conversations right away to make sure they understand your expectations. Be clear about what you as the leader can do to help them meet those expectations, and follow through on the support you offer.”

One thing Roellig says he has never been shy about is making decisions about who is on the team and who isn’t. “You cannot be slow to make cuts, if they are necessary. Dragging someone along because you are afraid to have a difficult conversation is disastrous to the team, it deflates morale, and it sends the message that poor performance will be tolerated, which, in turn, means good work isn’t highly valued.” Roellig says he has never minced words; he is clear. “If you need to let someone go, do it immediately—in consultation with human resources, of course.” Deloitte research corroborates this advice.¹³ Executives interviewed one year after taking the leading role within an executive function report that their No. 1 regret was not making talent decisions sooner. Roellig says he has watched too many decisions get delayed or not made at all, and they become a poor reflection on leaders, so it’s a negative for the team and the leader.

Roellig also believes that many leaders spend too much time trying to rehabilitate poor performance. On the contrary, Roellig says he is intentional about how he spends his time investing in talent: His time, energy, and efforts are laser-focused on stars. He says, “Look how you are spending your time. Are you spending as much time, or more, making the stars superstars as you are trying to make those below average, average? The power is all in the superstars!”



Well-Being

Roellig's final piece of advice on well-being stems from a career of high-demand, fast-paced corporate roles. This has been a leadership learning for him. He says he did not focus enough on this in his early leadership positions, and this was a mistake. Deloitte research shows that well-being is a priority rated highly by many workers, but not always valued by executives.¹⁴

Roellig says that the importance of finding this balance for yourself, and helping the individuals on your team do the same, cannot be overstated: "COVID-19 has reminded us of the dual imperatives of worker well-being and work transformation, but executives are still missing the importance of connecting the two. Organizations that integrate well-being into the design of work at the individual, team, and organizational levels will build a sustainable future where workers can feel and perform at their best."

Roellig has three suggestions for well-being:

Spend time in alignment with what you value.

Roellig admits he is an introvert. He says he would prefer to snowshoe in the mountains of Colorado alone with nature rather than be the center of attention at a fancy cocktail event. Roellig says he realized early in his career that he was perceived as uncaring and aloof because he preferred to work alone in his office with the door closed. He recalls he worked out a deal with himself: Every morning, he'd buy a large cup of coffee in the coffee shop downstairs. With coffee in hand, he would not allow himself to return to his desk until the coffee was gone. As he sipped his coffee, he walked the halls and stopped in to connect with his team. Roellig says he values open team communication, and the preference for working alone behind a closed office door is contrary to those values, so he developed a workaround.

Roellig says he has also learned the hard way that doing the right thing is always the right thing to do. He says just because you have a legal argument doesn't mean it is the right argument or decision. In the class he teaches at the University of Colorado Law School, he stresses that the students should identify the stakeholders on an issue and ask if the legal answer is the "right" answer for them. He talks about the burden he still bears for decisions he made that weren't aligned with his values—times he should've spoken up, acted up, or stepped up and didn't. He says, "I'm embarrassed by those failures. They still haunt me, but I talk about them because I hope my experience will give someone else the courage to do the right thing, even when it's very difficult—and it is often very difficult."

Workers prioritize transforming work for well-being more highly than executives

What are the most important outcomes you hope to achieve in your work transformation efforts in the next one to three years?

Rank	Senior executives	Individual workers
1	Improving the customer experience	Improving quality
2	Increasing innovation	Increasing innovation
3	Reducing cost	Improving worker well-being
4	Improving quality	Improving the customer experience
5	Doing new work	Doing new work
6	Increasing capacity	Reducing cost
7	Growing market share	Increasing capacity
8	Improving worker well-being	Growing market share
9	Increasing social impact	Increasing social impact

Note: n=4,738 (3,630 executives + 1,108 individual contributors).

Source: The 2021 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends survey.

Give back.

Roellig will be the first to tell you that he has a good life. He's accumulated enough assets to live comfortably and had opportunities his grandparents might never have imagined. He doesn't attribute that success to any innate talent or gift, but instead insists that he benefited from the work of the exceptional teams he had the privilege to lead. And he says because he knows his success is not his alone, he spends as much time as he can investing in others and suggests others make time to do the same. "Whether it's writing, teaching, mentoring, or board work, reinvesting what's been given to you is critically important," says Roellig. "After spending time thinking about it, I concluded that what makes me happy is adding significant positive value to those who have put their love (spouse, family) or trust (employees, shareholders, mentees, etc.) in me."

Roellig says he is also intentional about providing growth opportunities for others. He recognizes that most corporate legal departments, and most firms, are pyramids with little space at the top. But, he says, "We can empower people to lead from where they are by putting them in charge of projects they are passionate about like DEI, pro bono, or strategic long-range planning." The key, he says, is staying invested in those projects and being active in supporting the work being done so those you have put in charge feel that they are valued and the work they are doing is important.

Set the example.

Roellig says he knows that the team will watch how you act and what you do and often disregard what you say, especially if not aligned with your actions. With this in mind, he says you need to be clear on the actions they focus on (who is hired, who is

promoted, who is rewarded) and who has been terminated. Just as importantly, as the leader, you have to show that you care about people's individual and personal well-being and that you walk the talk. Roellig encourages leaders to open up, be transparent, and talk about the things they themselves are doing. "People watch their leaders like hawks. If you operate like a machine, they will try to emulate you. Instead, you have to articulate your values, then show people that you do it yourself." He notes that this transparency and vulnerability can be counter to successful executive culture, but it is important. Roellig says it is better to ask how people are feeling and discuss it—the acknowledgement of concern and listening to others' feelings are important aspects of a leader. Deloitte's research also highlights the notion that a focus on well-being can be counter to accepted culture, especially for lawyers,¹⁵ but echoes the importance of transparency for the well-being of the team.

When asked if he anticipates slowing down any time soon, Roellig just smiles. He says he loves the coaching work he is doing, although he admits that he doesn't miss the long days, grind, and urgent deadlines of his days as an executive. Having moved from New England to his home in Vail, Colorado, he says he is enjoying the sunshine, slower days, and more skiing. But he says he hasn't stopped learning or investing in others, and he says he is always available to assist CLOs or their teams to be successful—it gives him the opportunity to be happy.

Endnotes

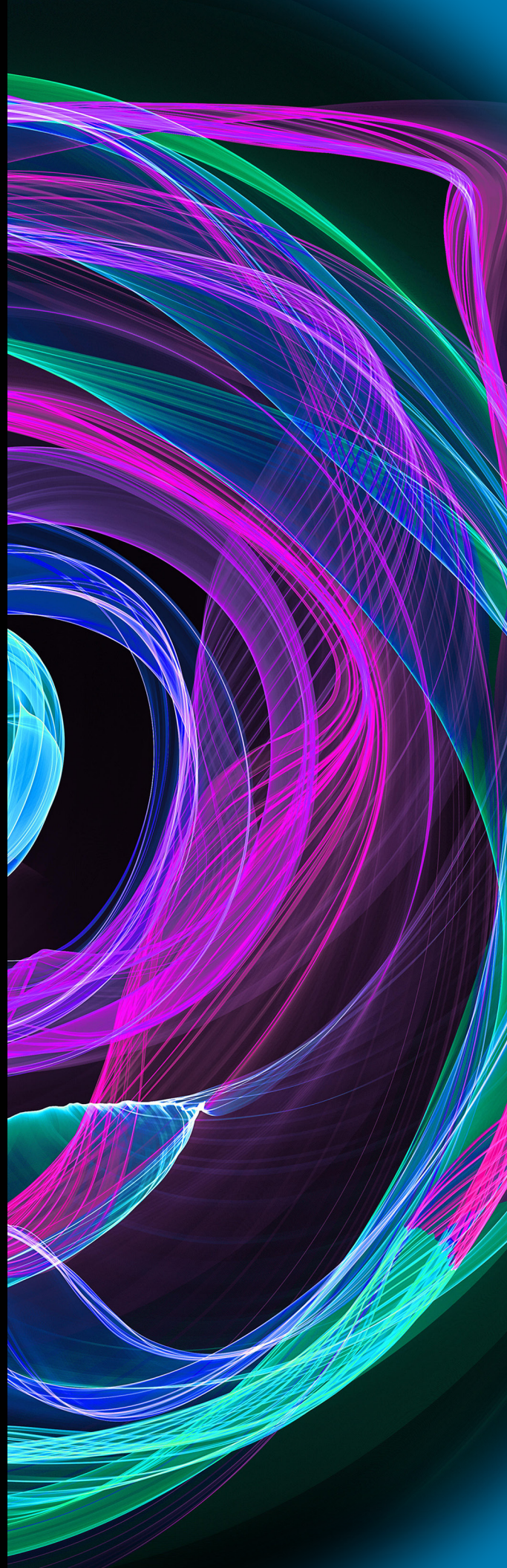
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