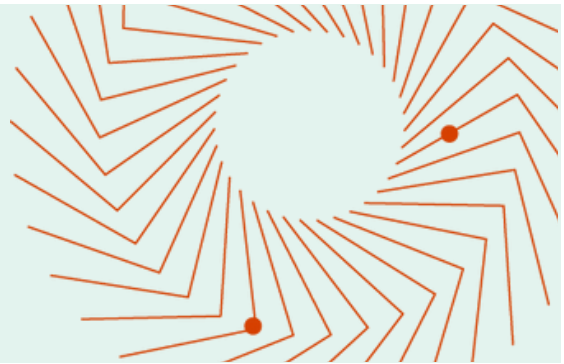


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The Four Spinning Plates Model

Understanding the complete picture of legal department value



This framework makes the invisible visible, providing a common language and visual framework that resonates with business leaders. It facilitates strategic conversations about legal's true value, moving beyond discussions solely about cost. This is not merely an academic framework but a practical tool, born from the experiences of hundreds of GCs, designed to bridge the perception gap and ensure legal departments are recognized for their full contribution to business success.

The four spinning plates explained

Extensive Thomson Reuters Institute research, analyzing hundreds of General Counsels' strategic priorities over several years, led to the Four Spinning Plates Model. This comprehensive analysis revealed a clear, consistent pattern: despite changing business environments, evolving regulations, and technological disruption, four main areas of strategic priority remained evergreen. While GCs' emphasis on each priority may shift due to internal and external forces, these four categories consistently capture the full scope of legal department objectives.

The model identifies these four perpetual responsibilities as: Effective, Efficient, Protect, and Enable.



Effective: Delivering high-quality, practical legal advice and outcomes in response to the business' needs.

Efficient: Optimizing resources, processes, and spend and leveraging technology.

Protect: Safeguarding the organization from legal, regulatory, and reputational risks.

Enable: Supporting business growth, innovation, and strategic objectives.

Why the spinning plates metaphor?

We chose the 'spinning plates' metaphor to represent GCs' relentless management of all four plates simultaneously. No matter which plate demands urgency or receives more stakeholder attention, it's a continuous balancing act where all four must remain in motion and important. None can be dropped, like a performer keeping multiple plates spinning.

The spinning aspect is crucial: all four plates require constant, interconnected attention. Efficiency gains free up resources for strategic enablement. Effective advice prevents disputes, reducing protection costs. Strong protection builds trust, enabling bolder business strategies. Successful business enablement demonstrates value, justifying further efficiency investments. Conversely, negative impacts cascade: deep efficiency cuts reduce quality and effectiveness. Over-focusing on protection can label legal as the "Department of No," while poor effectiveness undermines credibility.

Closing the perception gap

What makes this model particularly powerful is that it represents the true, complete picture of a GC and legal department's role, purpose, and value in their business. This comprehensive view stands in contrast to how legal departments are often perceived. Our research revealed a disconnect: when C-suite executives describe where they expect legal departments to focus, they consistently over-emphasize the Effective plate while under-recognizing the Protect and Enable plates. This perception gap has real consequences for legal departments struggling to obtain resources for protection initiatives, whose enablement contributions go unnoticed, and whose efficiency efforts are seen merely as cost-cutting rather than value optimization.

A critical contributing factor to this misalignment is that most legal departments' metrics anchor solely to the 'Efficiency' plate. Very few legal departments use metrics reflecting their full range of responsibilities. This limits legal's perception to a cost center, not a value enabler.

Telling the complete value story

The Four Spinning Plates Model empowers legal departments to finally tell their complete value story, moving beyond the limiting cost-center narrative. It helps them demonstrate their essential role as strategic business partners creating value across multiple dimensions. Instead of defaulting to cost metrics, GCs can articulate value across all four plates. For example, instead of reporting "we reduced outside counsel spend by 15%," they can tell a complete story: "We delivered value by maintaining high stakeholder satisfaction and handling more matters (Effective), reducing costs through technology and process improvements (Efficient), preventing potential regulatory fines through proactive compliance (Protect), and accelerating product launch timelines through innovative legal structures (Enable).

Adopting the Four Plates Model allows legal departments to shift from perceived cost centers to strategic partners, securing resources and recognition for their full contribution.

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Value Alignment Toolkit

[Access toolkit](#)

