

2012 Top 10 30-Something: Angela Hughes

Interviews and Profiles



Corporate Counsel, Governance Manager and Assistant Corporate Secretary

Age: 39

Proudest achievement: “I have a great husband, great kids and a great career at a place that I love, so my proudest achievement is having an extraordinary balance of experiencing the best of both worlds.”

Taking it slow

In August 2006, Angela Hughes started Franklin Electric’s legal department as the company’s first and only in-house attorney. “When I first came on, my instinct was that we needed five lawyers and five support staff members,” she says. “But I learned that it’s important to take it slow — learn the company’s needs and the client’s expectations for the department.” Hughes did this through organizing frequent meetings with the business partners, sitting in on presentations and earnings calls, and reviewing the company’s financial filings. Since she came to Franklin, she has built the legal department to two attorneys (including herself) and two support staff members.

Changing the 60+-year-old company’s mentality from reactive to proactive has been challenging, but visibility has helped. Hughes gives regular presentations to various departments covering everything from utilizing the legal department to legal topics affecting the business; she also listens in on financial and operations calls. Hughes says she’s used a gentle balance between rigid advice and flexibility based on risk analysis to earn business partner trust, reminding herself to be patient: Gaining respect takes time. “I had to remember when people didn’t immediately trust me that it wasn’t personal,” she says. “Everyone works differently; some people trust until you lose that trust, and some don’t give you their trust until you earn it.”

Hughes is a participative, democratic leader who often engages her staff and business partners for input. “I don’t know everything and I don’t claim to,” she says. “Even in building this department, I relied frequently on my colleagues for their comments.” The legal team has weekly meetings and a tracking system that keeps them aware of all matters. The system was developed in a one-day offsite conference, where the department brainstormed ideas, talked about strategy, discussed challenges, and ultimately, determined how to improve efficiency.

Other streamlining efforts have included Hughes’ implementation of a company-wide document retention policy. She said that as her first major project at Franklin, it was a learning experience. “The lesson was: Don’t jump in the pool until you know how to swim.” When she set out to survey 150 employees in different departments and countries on their document retention habits, she got immediate pushback. After taking a step back, the department reevaluated its approach. “We realized that we didn’t explain the process, why we were doing the project or even the risk it would ultimately mitigate,” she says. So, on the second attempt, Hughes first presented the initiative to the executive team and got their buy-in. Eventually, the survey received a very successful 95 percent response rate. That allowed Hughes and her team to create an accurate retention schedule on which to base the policy.

Hughes remembered this experience during her next major system overhaul: implementing an online learning database with interactive training programs in multiple languages. “We learned to identify where things could go wrong and fix them, before asking employees to spend their time on the

program,” she says. “We went through at least six test rollouts, so that we weren’t fixing glitches in the system after it had been pushed to employees.” It was a deliberate and thorough approach to a now-fruitful program, and it represents Hughes’ broader philosophy: Due diligence and thoroughness have great payback. Slow and steady wins the in-house race.

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