

Franklin's Focus

Victor Franklin is not one to fall back from a challenge. Franklin is the chief counsel for the Washington Energy and Environment Group, which incinerates chemical weapons for the United States Army. Franklin is also general counsel at the Savannah River Company; a Westinghouse facility that employs more than 13,000 people manufacturing tritium, which, among other uses, powers NASA's space probes. In a recent interview, Mr. Franklin opens up on the challenges of his job and the changing role of general counsel in the business world.

On difficult jobs and controversy:

At the Washington Group, we accept jobs with the understanding that they will be difficult. Successfully managing a controversial project requires a diverse range of skills. In every case, we have a number of stakeholders, including our customer, which is the U.S. government, and the people and local politicians in the community. We offer each stakeholder group the opportunity to present its point of view and then craft a game plan with serious consideration for the effects it will have on each group. Once we have all relevant opinions in place, we make a decision that we feel is best for all of the stakeholders.

The process is never perfect. Effective communication, then, is imperative.

On beginnings:

My undergraduate degree is in chemistry; I later received my J.D. from the University of Illinois. While an attorney with a chemistry degree may be unusual, both disciplines require analytical skills and the ability to study and anticipate variables.

After law school, I served for five years as a prosecutor in Chicago for the Environmental Protection Agency. I came to Westinghouse and the Washington Energy and Environment Group because they needed someone with an environmental background to manage the legal aspects of their GoCo operations, which are government-owned, company-operated facilities. The Westinghouse facility in Anniston that incinerates the Army's chemical weapons is part of this group.

On the changing role of the general counsel in business:

The role of general counsel requires considerably more skills than it did in years past. Our primary responsibility is still to mitigate risk and to manage litigation. But we are out front leading issues far more often. A general counsel must also wear a business hat more effectively than in years past; we have to understand the ramifications a legal decision might have on the business.

I believe we do more preventive lawyering. We can never afford to neglect small issues because they can become big issues very quickly. For instance, ignoring a comment from the community surrounding a facility can create a lightning rod for people to say the contractor is not responsive.

The general counsel role has historically been given carte blanche in regards to budget. Today, we must be more fiscally responsible. A class-action lawsuit can easily cost millions and we have to find ways to mitigate risk and achieve cost-effective solutions.

On lessons learned:

The most important thing to remember is to be responsive to your customer. Even if you think you have the right answer, at least listen to what your customer has to say so that you can benefit from understanding his position.

On success:

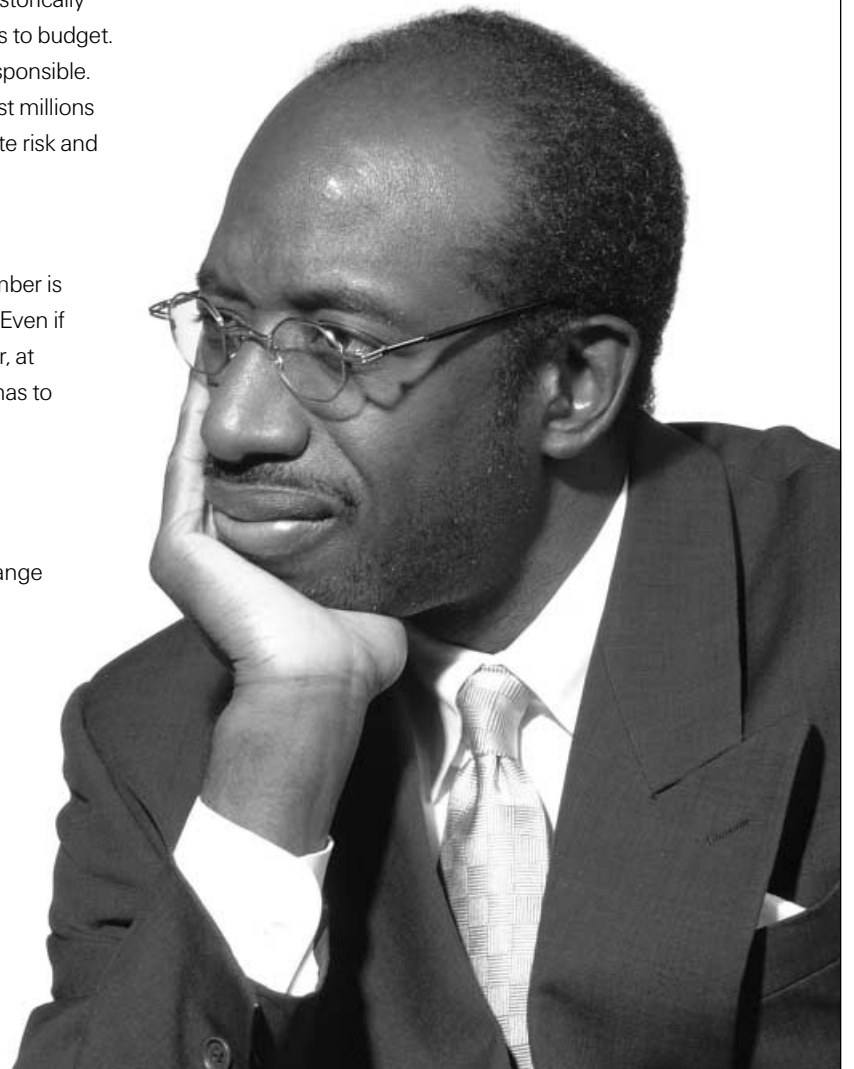
Great leaders adapt to change; change is the only constant we face. Great leaders see change as a new way

to achieve success.

To be successful, you must also have a thirst for knowledge. You must be able to have fun, because without that skill I don't believe you can be open to new ideas. In business, there is no substitute for being in the field talking to customers; you have to understand first hand the problems they face.

And one last thought: don't be afraid to hire people smarter than you. As general counsel, by the time a problem rises to your level, there should be a path to a solution.

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