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Meet Maria Lancri: To succeed with compliance implementation, understand the context

By Maria Lancri and Gerry Zack

GZ: At what point in your life did you decide to study law? Were other career paths given much consideration, or did you know law was for you from an early age?

ML: In France, we study law right after high school. I went into law because I didn't want to have to continue to study mathematics, which would have been necessary if I had gone with a major in business or economics.

I studied law without thinking I would become a lawyer—much less a “pleading” lawyer, which I was at the beginning of my career. I believed I would be able to escape law to go into journalism or work for an international organization.

French law studies are still very theoretical. It was only after my years in the U.S. studying for an LLM at Southern Methodist University that I realized I should finalize my curriculum by taking the bar exam.

GZ: You've held internal compliance positions as well as served as an outside counsel and adviser to clients, which is what you do in your current role. How would you describe how the challenges differ between internal roles and those of an external adviser?

ML: I went into compliance step by step 15 years ago as part of my in-house position. What was most challenging internally at the time—and I believe this is still the case in less mature organizations—was convincing corporate officers not only to focus more time on compliance matters and have an appropriate budget but also ensuring that peers from the legal department understood that compliance had legitimate needs that required action from them. Compliance needs to be somewhat centralized to be efficient, and employees need to be trained in order to understand and implement the policies and procedures you come up with. Legal has a function to assist but not control. These are two separate functions. At the time, I was lucky to be trained in change management techniques to help me understand and communicate the necessary changes.

As an external adviser, one of the challenges is obviously to find and retain clients. Using my in-house background, I learned how to propose progressive and realistic missions that can be accepted by organizations and adapted to their maturity.

A second challenge when you work as an external adviser is getting full disclosure and background on the way the business is organized and thus, the ability to provide an adequate service. This is not always possible when you have one sole point of contact in the organization—even more so now, with how difficult it can be to

organize on-site meetings. This is why having full board participation is critical.

GZ: As an outside adviser, you deal with organizations in a wide variety of industries, each with its own set of compliance challenges. Where do you most commonly see differences, and where do you see the common challenges faced by compliance professionals regardless of sector?

ML: Common challenges arise at the time of drafting and implementing policies and procedures, because employees generally do not grasp or want to see that compliance is necessary to protect them and the organization. They often see it only as a burden. With policies and procedures, they will have to perform more checks and controls before doing what they consider to be their “real work.” For that reason, compliance professionals (internal and external) need to help them understand and accept that compliance is part of their day-to-day work. We need to have strong skills in persuasion and psychology in order to do so.

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