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Meet Susan Du Becker: Driving compliance forward

By Susan Du Becker and Adam Turteltaub

AT: You have one of the most interesting and unusual backgrounds of anyone I have had the privilege of interviewing. There are plenty of people who were lawyers who went into compliance, were in internal audit, or were in the business unit. You have worked in an enormous range of roles: product management, business development, sales, consulting—and you have a law degree. I imagine that range of experience has been immensely helpful for you in understanding compliance from the workforce’s perspective. Yes?

SB: Absolutely. When you have dipped your toes into other parts of the business world, it gives you a different perspective on how these areas interact with each other and adds to the richness of understanding when it comes to compliance. I always look at what the objective is, not what the problem is.

I also look at regulatory compliance as “table stakes,” meaning we should be doing it anyway (assess the risk and address it). Many see it as a check-the-box operation where only that checkmark is required, and nothing else counts. Wrong. There are risks when you check the box because they are absolutes. (I’m thinking Sarbanes–Oxley Act controls here.) In other areas, I always overlay ethics and our values over compliance risks because it does not matter how good you are; you must understand what the impact may be if the problem is not addressed in the right way. It is not always about the laws, lawsuits, and litigation. In my world, it really does take a village to ensure we hold each other to certain standards and then strive for more.

AT: Does it help provide credibility when working with business colleagues?

SB: Yes. When your colleagues hear that you also understand their pain points—whether around sales, marketing, procurement, or finance—they tend to be more open. I currently work with supply chain, and now that they know I came from General Electric (GE) lighting manufacturing and managed some production lines, they feel I understand their pain points and can align accordingly. When you talk in terms of relevance, they tend to listen. Many people regard compliance as an onerous task. I want them to embed the questions that need to be asked within their own DNA and make them a part of their own business asks. They need to see this as a benefit and not just a cost. Compliance can be a key business proposition when used the right way.

AT: What advice would you give to others who don’t have that experience? How can they get it, or at least a taste of it?

SB: Reach out and shadow someone in another part of your business; offer to be part of a collaborative team; look outside your function; and, where you see a gap, never be scared to ask for input. If you don’t ask a question, you’ll never learn. I call mine “stretch assignments.” It’s all about adding value and being impactful. How much

do you want or need to contribute?

AT: When we first met, you were working in compliance at Cisco. After all those other careers within your career, what led you to compliance? Or were you pushed into the role?

SB: I was pushed—or “voluntold.” With my background in law, understanding of the business, and my project management skill set, I was well placed to look at the broader development of the Cisco compliance program at the holistic level.

I didn’t think I would enjoy it but working with other functions across the broader company allowed me to expand my knowledge (oh look, learning time again) across the network and help build something that would add value, impact, and meaning to the company overall.

AT: You have stayed in compliance for over 12 years now. What makes the profession interesting and exciting for you?

SB: I am a very positive person. Again, strict compliance, to me, is like table stakes. If all I have to do is find the relevant law and ensure we meet it, how boring is that? The interesting part is looking at how things overlap, cause and consequence, measuring tolerance, and educating people on why it is important. Compliance cannot be defined as a check-the-box operation; otherwise, you have lost the battle before it even starts. Business is not only made up of rules, policies, procedures, and guides; it is made up *of people*, many of whom don’t pay attention to the rules, don’t care about/ignore them, believe rules/guides have nothing to do with them, do anything to get around requirements, or (my personal favorite) think, “It’s not my job; it is someone else’s.” I have to balance several aspects: how the construct of ethical behavior—the character, values, culture, and moral fiber of the company—aligns as you enact or implement the rules/guidelines to deliver what is needed and required. I should have been a professional juggler in a previous life!

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