

## **Eli Lilly's Teri Cotton Santos Discusses Diversity Issues and Reflects on Her Experiences 'In-House' and Beyond**

### ***Women Connect***

By Tanya Lawson

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Teri Cotton Santos, a member of the Sedgwick Women's Forum Advisory Board, is an assistant general counsel in litigation for Eli Lilly and Company, where she has worked for the past 13 years. Teri worked briefly in a law firm after law school and later joined the St. Louis Circuit Attorney's Office. Ultimately, she chose to go "in-house" with Eli Lilly because it provided the potential for doing things "beyond the law."

Teri sat down with Sedgwick partner Tanya Lawson to discuss what it's like being in-house counsel and shared her views on diversity efforts. Below are some excerpts of her responses to Tanya's questions.

#### **What are some of the things you enjoy about being in-house?**

I enjoy the perspective you have as an in-house lawyer. I think outside lawyers focus a lot on the law, and what is *the law* as it relates to a particular business problem. I think in-house lawyers, because they spend a lot more time with non-lawyer clients, spend a lot more time thinking about how we solve problems from the business perspective. And also I like that it's generally flexible. I have one client. And, for the most part, I have some flexibility in how I plan my days and my work.

#### **Is working in-house the panacea that many think it is or are there challenges that you and other women like you face in that environment?**

I wouldn't say it's a panacea, I think all environments have their challenges. While I was at a law firm, one of the things I found difficult was understanding the culture, the environment, the unwritten rules. Some may think that the rules might be clearer in a corporation, but I don't think that's necessarily true. I think it is important to understand the environment and what it means to be successful in that environment, and how individual work is valued. And I think that is going to be an issue in whatever work environment you find yourself in.

#### **What other challenges have you or other women experienced to your knowledge in the in-house environment?**

Work-life balance continues to be a challenge for in-house women. I don't think there is much substantive difference between the pressures that some women feel in a law firm to balance work and life and the pressures that women feel from within a corporation as they try to balance those things.

I've mentioned the challenge of understanding the culture and what leads to success. I'd add to that the challenge of building trust with colleagues, particularly colleagues who are different than you.

## **What are some personal choices you have made for your own development?**

It is important to maintain a level of learning agility and curiosity. So I have made a very conscious effort to reach out to others both within Lilly legal and other parts of the corporation to make sure I am learning as much as I can about what other people do, how it intersects with what I do and how our business operates in general.

One thing I've done and I think women in law firms are doing as well, is try to identify people I trust who can give me good feedback. That way I can know how I am appearing to others and how I am impacting others. If there are things that I need to do differently, I make sure I am portraying the person and the image I want to portray.

I also think the ability to identify some trusted mentors in any work environment, law firm or corporation is important.

## **Do you know of any collaborative efforts that inside and outside counsel can engage in to help address issues women face in-house?**

It is always helpful to have mentors outside your organization. Mentors within your organization can give feedback within the context of the organizational culture. Outside of the organization, people can give you an external perspective so that you are not just developing yourself within the framework of just one culture.

There are opportunities for in-house and outside lawyers to collaborate and mentor one another. It can be difficult as a client. Unless you have developed a really strong relationship with your outside counsel, they see you as a client, and they don't always want to give you that transparent feedback.

I would encourage women lawyers who are in-house and outside counsel to strive to develop relationships of trust with one another and to be transparent.

## **What are your thoughts on the Sedgwick Women's Forum?**

I am very glad to be a part of the advisory board because it gives me an opportunity to hear firsthand how Sedgwick is making efforts to support and encourage the development of women.

I really think that the Sedgwick Women's Forum has a terrific program and provides a variety of activities. One of the things I think you do well is you provide opportunities for your women partners to engage directly with women clients at some of your social events. I think

that for a lot of women that is important. They really want to know that they can connect what they do personally, what they do professionally and their commitment to the community in a meaningful way.

I often encourage my outside lawyers to make sure that the firms are supporting diversity in the legal profession, that there is diversity among the lawyers who are representing us. So hearing the efforts of Sedgwick's Women's Forum and sharing the perspectives and "best practices" of other women on the advisory board has been very beneficial to me.

## **What are some takeaways from your law firm experience?**

I didn't like the concept of billable hours *at all*. I really thought it created some perverse incentives and that it wasn't in general in the best interest of clients.

Advice for women in law firms: As you move up in your career, you want to make sure you are getting good assignments, that you are growing as an attorney. You want to make sure you're getting visibility among the leadership within the firm as well as among clients, who can give you feedback that will help you to develop and grow.

Feedback for firms: You should look very critically at the model you have designed in order for women to be successful and make sure it is the right model. When I talk to colleagues about what they believe it takes to be a successful partner in a law firm, I see some parallels to an experience I had a few years ago. While I was Lilly's general counsel in Asia, one of the challenges we had was that we didn't have a lot of women who were general managers of countries. When we conducted a survey, we realized that a lot of women were not attracted to that job because of the way that it was being done. It involved long hours, a lot of after work entertaining with customers. It just seemed like a very exhausting job, for anyone, but especially for those women who were the primary caretakers of their families. So we really began to ask ourselves "Does the job have to be that way?"

We began talking more about balance, and we began focusing at impact vs. "face time." Our male general managers began making an effort to show their teams how to be successful and balanced and gradually we saw the dynamic change.

## **Where do you see the greatest opportunities for women in law firms today?**

There is a strong need for innovative leaders and people who can think outside the box. I think that women have a real role to play in that. You also really need to make sure that you have leaders who can align those interests so that the decisions can be made and the business can move forward. And I think women have a skill set that allows them to be very successful at that kind of leadership.

## **Are there things on the diversity front that should be done to address issues affecting women and people of color's participation in law firms at the higher levels?**

Law firms tend to have really good ingredients to achieve diversity and to enable participation of women within firms. Where I think law firms, and corporations, quite candidly, can provide a bit more focus is on the accountability piece. We can all do a better job of not only having a commitment to diversity and the success of women, but to holding ourselves accountable to achieving that.

**There are skeptics regarding the benefits of women's programs. Do you believe that the Sedgwick Women's Forum has a positive impact beyond the walls of Sedgwick?**

I do think that there are some real benefits from a business perspective, a community perspective and a recruiting perspective. There is obviously an impact beyond the walls of Sedgwick because of the way you engage with the community through your volunteer efforts. From a recruiting perspective, in the *war for talent*, the success of the Women's Forum can set your organization apart by highlighting the success of women leaders at Sedgwick and the firm's commitment to diversity. From a business perspective, because of your members' connections, you have the opportunity to develop new clients for the firm.

**Companies have been issuing various statements regarding their commitment to diversity in recent times and, as you indicated, have encouraged their outside law firms in this regard. Is Lilly engaging in any specific actions to enforce these directives?**

One thing we need to do, and it is a really hard thing to do, is have consequences if our request for diverse representation is not being met.

And Lilly has had to do that in the past, and it was not an easy thing to do. But, I think when that happens, law firms will understand that this is a serious commitment.

At the same time, we are always willing to partner with our firms in their recruitment and development efforts for diverse attorneys. Lilly lawyers have mentored and coached young associates; we have shared summer clerks with our firms and we have participated in secondments and other efforts to expose us to the broad array of talent at firms.

**Have you observed greater diversity in legal teams representing Lilly since beginning to request diverse legal teams?**

I think it's something we really do need to stay on top of, but yes. Yes, we are seeing more diverse teams. We, as a part of our annual business review with our preferred outside counsel groups, include a diversity questionnaire. We ask all kinds of questions about what the firm is doing around diversity. Not just numbers within the firm, but attrition rates. We ask about things that the firm is doing to ensure accountability, to make sure that there is leadership involvement at the top.