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Team must be 'ready for anything'

By Allison Petty
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As vice president and general counsel for the 15-state Midwest area of Verizon Wireless, Barrington Lopez compared his department's work to the television sitcom "M*A*S*H."

The show's Vietnam-era doctors never knew who or what type of injury would come off the helicopter, Lopez said. In the same way, his 16-person legal team does a lot of initial intake and must be prepared for any area of law that comes in the door.

"They have to be ready for anything," he said.

To help shoulder some of the work, Lopez said he employs a significant number of outside firms for different specialties or regions. Those attorneys must be able to grasp facts very quickly and pick up on how the business runs, he said.

Lopez spends one-third to half of his time outside the office, educating state agencies about the company's mission and visiting Verizon stores. He said he talks to employees and customers and believes other corporate lawyers should do the same.

"I think it's incredibly important to know the business at the place where the customer understands the business," he said.

Diversity, experience and reputation are all factors Lopez considers when choosing outside counsel. He said he will not tolerate attorneys who do not return phone calls or at least let him know when they will.

"I think of outside counsel as a service business," Lopez said. "They need to be, like any other professional services organization, they must be responsive."

Steven F. Ginsberg of Ginsberg, Jacobs LLC said Lopez immediately struck him as "no-nonsense" when the two met after Lopez took over Verizon's Midwest area in 2007.



Barrington Lopez

Vice President and General Counsel
Midwest Area at Verizon Wireless

Age: 44

Law School: Rutgers University School of Law - Newark, 1994

Organizations: Association of Corporate Counsel, Chicago chapter; Association of the Bar of the City of New York; New Jersey Orators; Rutgers University School of Law - Alumni Association; New York University Alumni; Bronx High School of Science Alumni; Bronx High School of Science Speech & Debate Team Alumni

Activities: Playing squash; writing; and spending time with his wife, Ruby, and daughter, Chundzom

Now, they have become friends and neighbors. But Ginsberg said he knows that if he or his firm makes an error, Lopez would not hesitate to end the working relationship.

Ginsberg's advice to other attorneys working with Lopez: "Don't make any mistakes. ... He's not a mistake kind of guy."

Chicago attorney James G. Richmond of Greenberg, Traurig LLP said Lopez is fair and inclusive but does not give second chances. Richmond advised attorneys working with Lopez for the first time to listen carefully.

"Make sure you clearly get the message he sends you," he said.

Communication is important to Lopez, who received a bachelor's degree in journalism from New York University.

"In my heart of hearts, even as a lawyer, I'm still a writer. I convey different sets of facts and I convey them differently, but I'm still a writer," Lopez said.

He said he is working on a novel, but would not divulge its plot.

Lopez, 44, did not always anticipate a career in law. For several years before he began law school at the Rutgers University School of Law-Newark, he worked in writing and marketing.

His mother, however, thought he would be a good lawyer. She named him after a chief judge on the Jamaican version of the U.S. Supreme Court, Lopez said.

Lopez's parents immigrated to the United States from Jamaica when Lopez was 7. It was wintertime and he said he still remembers seeing snow for the first time. He grew up in the Bronx, one train stop from Yankee Stadium, and is still loyal to New York sports teams.

Now Lopez has a family of his own: Ruby, his wife of 10 years, and Chundzom, his 16-year-old daughter. ("Chundzom," he said, is a Tibetan name that means "noble.")

When he is not spending time with his family, Lopez is active in a variety of organizations, including the American Association of Corporate Counsel and the Minority Association of Corporate Counsel.

He also enjoys playing squash. It's hard to get a game together, but when he can, "I will play for as many hours as I can stand up," he said.