

# Hispanic Executive

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**MARIA GONZALEZ CALVET**  
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# General Electric's Anti-Corruption Warrior

Knowing Spanish set Maria Gonzalez Calvet on the legal path she loves. Knowing cross-functionality helps her excel at it.

by Kelli Lawrence

**M**aria Gonzalez Calvet laughs at the fact that, in her senior year of high school, she was voted “most likely to succeed.” The caption predicted she’d be pursuing justice in the halls of courtrooms. Given that she does indeed practice law—currently as executive counsel of global investigations for General Electric—her classmates proved quite prophetic.

Calvet intended to study English and Spanish literature with the goal of being an educator like most of her Cuban and Columbian-rooted family. It wasn’t until graduate school that she got in deeper touch with what she calls “a level of advocacy that had more of a direct, day-to-day impact through my work.”

Initially, Calvet did not intend to focus her law practice on anti-corruption, either. She was a third-year junior associate at a firm, when she got her big break: a call for a Spanish-speaking attorney. Calvet soon proved her mettle conducting interviews and collecting data in South America, helping uncover allegations of white-collar corruption.

“It was an amazing, completely accidental fusion of almost everything that mattered to me,” she recalls. “It was honing my craft of practicing law in the context of Latin American culture, political history, and business. It was dedicating my work to helping companies get it right, and engage in business in Latin America in an ethical way. And it was all to reduce corruption

in Latin America, which is a scourge that keeps our part of the world from being all it can be.”

Her efforts landed her a job with the Fraud Section of the Criminal Division of the US Department of Justice in 2010, where she enforced the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act along with a select number of other prosecutors. International corruption continued to be her prime concern, though there were always issues of bank fraud, healthcare fraud, and money laundering to contend with, as well.

Then came word from a colleague that General Electric was in the process of creating a dedicated team of lawyers within the company to focus on global investigations. Calvet knew GE’s highly ethical

reputation, respected its integrity, and knew it was the kind of company she'd enjoy working for.

Once she joined the company and was given the opportunity to focus her work on Latin American investigations, her new mission became even clearer. "It was an opportunity to contribute in Latin America with a different hat," she says. "I work directly with business leaders, finance professionals, compliance managers . . . I know my expertise and what I bring to the table, but every matter that comes up, I'm always working with different people, doing different things. I'm a perpetual student."

One thing she's learned along the way is the importance of cross-functionality in work relationships. Sometimes, Calvet says, we choose the people we work with by virtue of an established prior successful experience with a colleague in another function—our trusted "go-to" people. Other times, colleagues become part of a team Calvet leads simply by virtue of the role they serve.

"Then there are the ones who say, 'Well I'm not sure who has the right answer to this, but there's got to be someone, so let's figure it out,'" Calvet notes. "Usually that person is someone in the business who can explain exactly how that technology or commercial opportunity works."

It's those people, she says, that make the difference at GE. "Each step is a value-add—not a willingness to just pass you off to the next person, but to facilitate a productive conversation—to achieve a result together. When I was first hired, I expected GE would be a huge corporate machine, so this was all pleasantly surprising to me."

Another positive benefit of cross-functional relationships is the amassing of people in an organization that carry different kinds of expertise. "If I'm leading a project, and have a set idea of how it should go," Calvet says, "I will introduce the plan to the team—but I always open it up for their input and feedback. Not just to poke holes in my plan, but to come up with a better plan."

Such an approach is all but unheard of outside GE, she thinks, because we live and work in a time where the cultural pressure for individuals to deliver is incredibly powerful. Letting go of that "control freak component" in so many of us requires a willingness to be vulnerable, Calvet says. For her, the possibility of her idea blossoming with others' input is too exciting to pass up. "It's central to the dialogue with the best managers I've ever had, and the best teams I've ever worked with," she says.

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And well-developed ideas are especially welcome as Calvet and her colleagues protect and defend GE from allegations of wrongdoing throughout Latin America. Corruption persists in that part of the world, as does Calvet's passion for eliminating it. But despite all she's seen in her various roles, she believes people by and large want to do the right thing—and do their jobs the right way.

"I never go into an investigation looking to play 'gotcha,'" she says. "What I'd rather do instead is help create and encourage an environment where it's easier to do right." ●

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