



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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## The Insecurity of Superiors

Attorneys work extremely hard in large law firms to achieve partner status. Even when they do become partners, there remain different lines of authority between partners which make some feel important and others quite insecure. When an associate is dealing with a partner, he or she is dealing with someone who is in a position to feel insecure because there are almost certainly going to be more important partners above him or her. The best thing you can do in the law firm environment is cater to a partner's need to feel important. Conversely, one of the worst things you can do in a law firm environment is do things to make a partner feel insecure. When you make a partner feel insecure, the response of the partner is generally to stop giving you work or lobby for you to be fired or replaced.

This article discusses two steps that generally occur in an associate's relationship with partners that can make a partner feel insecure. First, the relationship will generally start out well but will progress to the point where an associate may take for granted a partner's affections for him or her. Second, the associate may publicly outshine a partner he or she is working for. It is the latter mistake that is most often fatal to an associate's career. Despite a consistently excellent work product, the associate will quickly find himself out of a job despite being a very good practitioner. Finally, this article concludes with some advice as to how to avoid inspiring insecurity in partners.

### A. Do Not Take for Granted a Partner's Affections for You

All working situations require a distance between people. When you are hired by a law firm, it may be to work for a particular partner who may have hired you because he or she felt comfortable with you and had shared interests. Never mistake these shared interests of perceived affection for anything more than a professional relationship.

In the law firm environment, partners may share with you all sorts of details about their personal lives. You may get to know about a partner's family, may discuss personal issues at lunch during business trips, and you may even go out and get drunk with a partner or group of partners on occasion. Because your superiors are people too, you may begin to feel that the partners you are working for are your friends. As the relationship develops and the level of familiarity increases, you may even be under the impression that mistakes in work can be handled as friends, as well. None of this could be further from the truth.

It is a very typical pattern inside a law firm for an associate to begin doing work for a given partner and when the associate performs well, the partner increasingly gives the associate more and more work. At first, the partner is very unfamiliar to the associate and the associate is doing everything within their power to produce outstand-

ing work product and impress the partner. In addition, the associate will be extremely dedicated and will do whatever he can to make the partner look good. He will ensure that the work he is doing for the partner and the advice he gives the partner is of the highest quality.

Over time, whether it is six months or a year, the associate will begin to understand the partner's social and intellectual strengths and weaknesses. At first, the associate will not act on this and will continue to work as he always has for the partner: as a dedicated servant.

Napoleon once said, "If I am seen too much at the theater, people will cease to recognize me." Those in authority with a good sense of social intelligence realize that they should never become too familiar with their subordinates. Because partners are also not the most socially intelligent, as you work for them more, many will make overtures to form a personal bond. This may be a couple of beers after work or it may be several client meeting trips you go on where the two of you necessarily end up spending a lot of time socializing together. As you spend more and more time with a given partner, he or she will become familiar to you. You will begin to notice faults and see the partner for what he is: another human being.

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What most associates do not realize is that partners become familiar with them and give them a great deal of work because they believe a given associate makes them look good. With the increasing levels of familiarity with the partner, there often comes a turning point: something breaks down and the associate begins to take the partner's affection for him for granted. Finally, the associate begins to actively be aware of his strengths vis a vis the partner's.

What the associate often does not realize is that his presence and the dedication he has shown to the partner in the past is something that was very comforting to the partner. In addition, the associate's presence made the partner feel important and more secure in the work environment knowing someone was looking out for him. As the relationship between the partner and associate develops, it is common for some associates to suddenly believe they need to show others (either subtly or not) that they are smarter, more capable and better attorneys than the partners they are working for.

#### **B. Do Not Outshine the Partners You Are Working For**

Once an associate has become quite familiar with a partner socially and has begun to understand the partner's intellectual ability at work and the partner's particular strengths and weaknesses, he may be under the impression that he is "set." The belief is that because the partner loves the associate so much, the associate has suddenly reached a different plane than other associates and can begin behaving in a manner different from other subordinates in the firm.

This process of taking the partner for granted will proceed gradually. At first it may be answering client questions that the associate would normally refer to the partner. Over time, as the associate gains increasing confidence, the behavior may begin to escalate to the point where the associate begins disagreeing with the partner about issues in public, telling others in the presence of the partner that the partner is wrong about various things and taking credit for most of the work—both at the firm level and in the presence of clients. When the associate starts doing this, he is outshining the partner.

One of the more common mistakes associates make in law firms is becoming "too big for their britches" as their understanding of legal issues, the intelligence of various partners and the political landscape of the law firm unfolds to them. In the law firm environment, there are necessarily a certain number of associates who "get it" fairly early on. These associates, eager to impress, become competitive in demonstrating to everyone in the firm just how smart they are. In fact, many of these associates may be quite surprised when they discover they know more and are more intelligent than many of the partners they are working for. Empowered

by this new revelation, they may be under the impression that partnership and even “running the firm” is not too far off.

Socially intelligent associates are careful not to let others become aware of just how smart they are. The reason the socially intelligent associates do this is because they know that if they flaunt their superior intelligence in front of partners, they will inspire fear and insecurity in these partners.

After a year or two, when associates figure out what is going on with regards to the intellectual aspects of practicing law, many quickly begin to learn that they are smarter than many of the partners they are working with. They may comprehend issues much more quickly, they may see a “broader picture” than partners, they may understand aspects of the issues that will solve the firm’s clients dilemmas more effectively. Finally, because they are still quite new to the game of practicing law, such associates are often eager to demonstrate how strong they are by showing the partners they are working for, law firm clients and other associates just how smart and motivated they are. In their seemingly profound understanding of the issues they are dealing with, such associates may believe they are impressing partners and those around them a great deal.

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At first, the partners around the associate who is behaving like this may pretend to appreciate the associate’s superior intellect and insight. However, partners (like all of us) want to feel secure in their knowledge and superior to those around them in intelligence. This is especially so with clients of the partner. It is a massive career mistake to believe that by displaying your superior intelligence you will be impressing the partner and winning further affection from them. Instead, you will stir up insecurity and a wide variety of negative emotions in the partner. Due to this, the partner will not want you around. People want to spend time with those that make them feel good about themselves.

Finally, I should add that in addition to inspiring insecurity in a partner by publicly demonstrating your intelligence, you can also do this in the social milieu, as well. For example, if you are working for a partner who is very awkward socially and you are a social butterfly and able to mingle with a wide variety of people at parties and make others laugh and so forth this is likely to make a socially opposite partner you work for feel insecure. You need to be extremely careful about social aspects like this because they can be fatal to careers because they inspire insecurity. Even talking about your social expertise can upset partners who are not similarly situated.

I know a female associate who once worked for another female partner inside a law firm in a very small practice group. For the most part, the department was comprised of just the associate, one other associate and the partner. The woman partner was not that attractive and even spent office time asking the associate to assist her with writing ads to advertise the partner’s availability on an online dating site and to review classified ads for her. The partner became very friendly with the associate, went out drinking with her frequently and even called the associate late at night to talk about her life. The partner frequently spent a lot of time telling the associate how unfair the world was because there were no suitable men out there and men were not interested in women over 40. Additionally, the partner would frequently update the associate on how long it had been since her last date.

One day, the associate came into the partner’s office and at a certain time in the conversation showed her a picture of an attractive man she was involved with. The associate told the partner how much she liked the man and that she had spent the weekend with him. After that, the associate noticed a rapid change in the quality of her relationship with the partner. The partner stopped socializing with her completely. The partner also stopped giving the associate work. Within two months, the associate was asked to find another job by the management committee of the firm and told she had three months to find a job. What had formerly been an ideal relationship suddenly turned south. This sort of thing is all too common: A former favorite falls out of favor by daring to show strong personal attributes.

In conclusion, never, never assume for one moment that you can or should be better than the partners you are working for, either intellectually or socially. The egos of the partners you are working for are apt to be very fragile and you disturb them at your own risk.

### **C. How to Avoid Creating Insecurity in the Partners You Work For**

If you are smarter than a partner you are working for and you have ideas that logically and legally are obviously better than his or hers, ascribe these ideas to the partner. In fact, you should make an effort to ascribe these ideas as publicly as possible. Do this with clients. Tell other partners how good the ideas of the partner you are working for are. Be clear that what you are saying is merely an echo of the ideas of the partner you are working for.

In my position as a legal recruiter, I have the opportunity to meet some of the smartest attorneys out there. When I meet them, I am looking for several things. Though I already have their backgrounds in front of me, I am fleshing them out with a personal meeting. Because the substantial majority of these attorneys have sought me out for my expertise, they generally are there to listen to my advice as to what they should do. This goes for partners as well as associates.

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Something I have noticed over and over again is that the attorneys who have had the very best careers (be they partners or associates) with the best academic backgrounds are also the ones likely to act the most naïve when I am offering advice. The socially and academically smartest attorneys looking for help will never try to make me feel as if they are more intelligent than me. Instead, they will act naïve and make it seem as if they need the advice. They will also even ask questions that I know are obvious to them so that I can give an answer.

What is going on with this particular dynamic is important to understand. It is something that many successful students do with their professors and something that successful attorneys do with their superiors. When you are dealing with partners, it is always important to make them feel as if you need their advice. Partners want to bestow upon you their experience and feel wanted. In addition, making partners feel wanted and seeking their advice also serves to help them feel superior. You need to make the partners working for you feel superior. Asking for insight into various ideas and so forth (as long as you do not do it too frequently) will make a partner feel needed, intelligent and secure. If a partner is in a position where he cannot bestow his experience on you and feel superior, he may instead feel ill will. If you do not need him, he may conclude he does not need you either.

### **D. Conclusions**

In order to succeed in your interpersonal relationships with partners and become a partner yourself, you need to sublimate your strengths of intellect and your social strengths to the partner you are working for. This is essential.

While this advice may seem like you are being asked to be a “drone” this could not be further from the truth. You need to learn to become socially intelligent. These same skills will one day work with clients if you make it that far. By making the partners around you feel important, secure and good about themselves, you put yourself in the position to get more work and gain favor and eventual election to being a partner.

Finally, by playing this game and making others look better than you, the control for your future rests with you and you will let others’ insecurity work for you. If you play the opposite game and decide to shine, you risk the strong possibility that others’ insecurity will end the game far too early for you.