



ATTORNEY SEARCH

by A. Harrison Barnes, Esq.

The importance of being well-liked

One of the most persistent problems attorneys practicing law have is their failure to collaborate and learn from the other attorneys they are practicing law with. There are several factors that are essential for success in the practice of law and advancing in your career. Being well-liked and collaborating is one of the more important ones.

This is at odds with the types of personalities most attorneys have. Many attorneys were once quite competitive in an academic sense and spent a lot of their time studying alone to get an edge on their peers. In the law firm environment, most attorneys work alone in offices and do their best to generate as many billable hours as possible.

Amongst all of this solitary activity, however, attorneys are all part of a social dynamic inside their legal organization. Beyond any other single issue-including the attorney's work product-the largest obstacle and risk to an attorney's success is a social dynamic turning against the attorney. If your fellow associates, or even worse, the partners you work with, do not like you, word will get around and your future with your organization may be doomed.

I would argue that being well-liked inside a legal environment is more important than in most other professions. If you are an associate and are not liked by your colleagues, the partners will assume that clients will not like you either. Additionally, if partners do not like you, then you will not get a lot of work. If you are isolated from others within your legal organization, it is also far easier for the firm to let you go in times of economic uncertainty. You need to always be in a position where others want to do you a favor.

There are several keys to being well-liked in a legal environment and this article will examine some of the more important ones, including: (1) not getting involved in cliques; (2) never saying anything bad about any co-worker-no matter what; (3) making your superiors feel important, (4) listening, not talking too much, and asking about others, (5) participating in "group solidarity" activities, and (6) keeping your head down and smiling.

1. Do Not Get Actively Involved in Cliques

One of the most dangerous things you can do in a legal workplace is to get actively involved in a clique. While there is nothing wrong with being part of a social group, because of reasons specific to their environments, law firms are likely the wrong places to do this.

First, cliques-like all social organizations-go through their ups and downs. One of the most unifying things about

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cliques is that the members bond over a shared set of circumstances. When bad things happen to the members of a clique, the clique tends to come together and unite against the “negative outside forces” that created the bad circumstances. Rest assured, bad things will happen to members of every law firm clique.

In a large law firm, something in the neighborhood of over 50% of the associates in your class will leave and go to other jobs (or leave the practice of law entirely) within the first two to three years of their time with the firm. While this is not necessarily a bad thing for these attorneys, many of these attorneys will leave under bad circumstances where they have done something wrong. In addition, a lot of these attorneys will be angry with the firm and the firm’s partners and the partners will know they are angry. If you and a group of very close peers have been seen spending a great deal of time with someone who leaves under bad circumstances, the perception will be that you are angry about it too. The firm may even think you are a candidate for leaving for the same reasons. You do not want to be associated with this. You will be perceived as being on the wrong team.

Second, if you are involved in a clique, there will be other associates who, by the very existence of your clique, will feel excluded. They may not be invited to certain lunches, may hear about you doing things outside of work with other clique members and will walk by the office and see you and other clique members speaking. This will make them feel excluded. When people feel excluded they generally have a response.

The most typical response inside law firms is that the excluded people will form a clique of their own. Alternatively, they may decide that, since your particular group is not all that interested in them (rightly or wrongly), their best course of action is to work harder, kiss up to partners more, or look better than the members of your clique in some way or another.

Third, most of the people that make partner in large and midsized law firms were never part of cliques. The reason? They did not have the time! Most partners in substantive law firms worked extremely hard as associates, to the point that they had figurative blinders on to everything and everyone around them that was not relevant to their advancement. Most have very little to fall back on in their professional lives other than their work product. Moreover, many partners realized that cliques are bad news.

Generally, attorneys make partner because they are extremely committed to their firm and never telegraphed any sort of message that would question that commitment. When you join a clique, you immediately communicate the message that you are not like the partners were when they were in your shoes. This is bad news.

2. Never Say Anything Bad About Any Co-Worker-No Matter What

Law firms being what they are, your interaction with fellow associates will invariably contain rumors, statements about what other associates have done wrong and interesting stories about incredible events in other co-workers personal lives. This is a given. In addition, the professional competence of other associates will be frequently discussed among groups of attorneys.

The reaction of most associates is to listen intently to these stories and contribute their own negative feeling about the subjects of the stories. After all, relating another’s misfortune may give you the sense that you are doing very well. Furthermore, most associates love telling these sorts of stories and sharing rumors with each other. There are numerous problems with this.

First, you have no way of knowing how whatever negativity you relate will be communicated to the person you are speaking about. If word gets back to someone that you are saying negative things about them, they will be upset with you. They may also be waiting (eagerly) for you to do something wrong so that they can communicate your particular misfortune to others. The point is that you do not want to be associated with making negative statements about others. If you are someone who avoids this, when you do something meriting gos-

sip, others will be less likely to speak negatively about you.

Second, you do not look like a nice person when you engage in gossip. In fact, to most people with serious leadership potential, you look very weak. The weakest people are typically the ones who are most interested in gossip. Watch how the negative people react the next time you are in a group. Oftentimes, they will even smile because they are so happy that someone else has something negative associated with them. Do not allow yourself to fall into this trap. If you do not engage in gossip, others will respect you more.

Third, you also need to be extremely careful about saying negative things about paralegals, legal secretaries and others within your law firm. Watch out if you engage in this and they find out (and they will eventually). Unbeknownst to most associates, legal staff members relate in a much more informal way to partners and your superiors. If you upset them, they create tremendous difficulties for you in the firm. Most attorneys make mistakes that staff members cover for every week. Upset a legal staff member and you can kiss a lot of that shielding goodbye: They will ensure as many people know about your errors as possible. More importantly, they can tell partners that other associates do not like you and more. They can do this in a very simple manner that makes them look good and you bad. You do not want to fight this war.

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3. Make Your Superiors Feel Important

Your superiors have hired you because they need you to do work. Your job exists because they can't do everything themselves. You help them make money and look good, and in the process, you should make them feel important. If you do this, they will like you and will reward you. It is that simple.

First, you need to be a soldier and not a general. Soldiers carry out orders and do not question them. Generals give orders, hold power and get rewarded for strategy and a job well done. When you are working for a superior, you want them to get rewarded for your excellent work. They will, in turn, reward you.

One of the biggest mistakes that associates make in large law firms is to presume they are generals who have a great deal of latitude with decisions and whose advice regarding strategy and more is welcome at any time. It is not. No matter how smart you are, if you are dealing with anyone with substantially more experience than you, they probably have a reason for doing things the way they do.

I realize how this sounds. Nevertheless, when you are an associate in a law firm your job is to make your superiors look good. You do not make your superiors look good when you are constantly questioning their motives, not following orders and creating your own protocol. You'll have ample time to be a general later on. As an associate, though, you must be a soldier.

Second, your superiors want to surround themselves with people who make them feel good about themselves. If obtaining partnership is a secret to you, then I will tell you how it works. Just like you surround yourself in your personal life with people who make you feel good about yourself, so too do partners in their professional life. When they like people, they want to help them. Being well-liked by superiors requires making them feel important.

Third, your superiors (like you) face a lot of people who do not make them feel important. Whether this person is one of their superiors, a judge, or a spouse, most attorneys are surrounded with people who do not make them feel important. One way to stand out is to make your superiors feel important.

4. Listen, Do Not Talk Too Much, and Ask About Others

You need to listen to your superiors and co-workers. Most of us really like people who ask us about ourselves. Of course, to most of us, we are the most interesting people in the world. Most of the smartest people out there I have ever encountered are individuals who do a lot of listening and ask others questions about themselves.

People love to talk about themselves. Moreover, if you do a lot of listening you can learn a tremendous amount and grow. Avoid the temptation to just talk about yourself.

First, very few people take the time to listen to others. If you listen to others and their stories, they will like you better. They will think you are also interesting (even if they do all the talking). Think about the people you think are interesting and, most likely, they are the ones that let you talk about yourself the most.

Second, you never should volunteer a lot of information about yourself, your personal life or much of anything for that matter. I hate to say this, but unless you are scandalous or someone with remarkable traits, very few people care to listen to what you have to say anyway. I hate to say this, but it is largely true.

Third, you can learn a lot from listening. The more you listen, the more information you will learn and the more this will help your career.

5. Participate In "Group Solidarity" Activities

You need to go to the firm parties. You need to be there whenever the firm does something as a group. This is essential. If you are not there, you will telegraph the message that you do not like the people you are working with. Go to firm functions.

6. Keep Your Head Down And Smile

One of the most remarkable things I have ever witnessed was an election in an organization I was once in. It came time for the organization to elect a president and there were several candidates for the position. The problem was, each of the candidates was part of a particular faction of the organization and had enemies. The person that ended up winning was the person who never got involved in any conflict with the organization but (paradoxically) was one of the least involved and had the fewest friends within the organization. The person participated in the organization's activities, had several acquaintances in the organization, never said anything bad about anyone and never participated in gossip. This person won the election by a landslide.

And so too it is with law firms. The people who make partner and advance in law firms are most often the very same sorts of people. To advance you need to be nonconfrontational, well-liked and keep out of trouble. The best way to do this is to keep your head down, do good work and be associated with making people feel good. If you do this and nothing more you will have a lot of stability in any organization you join.

You should also do your best to smile a lot. While this may seem overly simplistic--smiling makes others feel good and they will associate you with a smile. Associate yourself with a smile.

Conclusions

Doing a good job inside a law firm is about a lot more than your work quality. It is about how well others like you. This also has a great deal to do with the success of many partners. If people like a partner in the community, for example, they tend to get more business than partners who are not well-liked.

An essay about being well-liked could go on and on. Certainly, a course in human relations could get much more involved with the issues than the few we have touched on here. If you follow the above rules, though, you should do just fine.