



## *Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes*

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### ***Four Union-Like Rules of All Law Firms You Need to Know About***

**Summary:** Learn the four rules that make all law firms similar to blue collar unions and what you must do to stay employed by them.

When I was growing up, there was a family down the street that was always fighting and having problems. The family never had any money and their power was always being turned off. When the family couldn't pay the gas bill, the kids had to come over to our house to take baths. When it came time for us to join the Boy Scouts, my mother (who was not exactly wealthy herself) purchased the uniform for the other boy my age. This family lived a hard life. The mother was uneducated, had no skills and worked in a fast food restaurant to make ends meet. The four children lived together in a bedroom and entertained themselves by looking at Sears Catalogs and dreaming of getting things they saw in there as presents.

One day, I asked my mother why this family was so poor. I knew the father was a plumber and I always thought plumbers made a lot of money. One of the girls I knew was the richest girl in my class—the family had a large pool, nice cars and even belonged to a local golf club—and her dad also was a plumber. Yet my neighbors were among the poorest people I knew.

My mother was very quick to give me the answer: “They are poor because the father does not believe in unions and refuses to work on union jobs. For the type of work he does, he needs to be in a union. They would be wealthy if he believed in unions, but he does not. No one will give him any work because he is not part of the union.”

I thought about this several times while growing up and have thought about it numerous times since. Being part of the union back then meant things like (1) paying dues, (2) charging a certain amount for work, (3) working with other people who shared similar values, and (4) being in solidarity with others (and excluding those who do not match your values).



These characteristics of unions—and there are many—are no different than some of the characteristics we find in the legal profession. If you aren't willing to do things a certain way, or play by certain rules, you will not be part of the union. ***The results for not being part of the union are harsh, unforgiving and destroy the lives and families of the attorneys who do not participate in the “union”.*** There is most certainly a “union” in the legal profession and attorneys that go against the union face massive resistance in their job search.

I see people who are not part of the legal union all the time. Like the family down the street, they typically are faced with running out of money and a variety of pressures that have brought them to their knees. Each rejection they face torments them and makes them feel like caged animals being tormented by a captor running a stick along the bars of their cages.

My typical conversation with an unemployed attorney (or soon to be unemployed attorney) is almost always along the same path. The attorney is unhappy and tormented and starts complaining about his current or past job. The attorney will typically complain about:

- The type of work they are being given (it is beneath them, too complex, or not complex enough).
- Their supervisors (who are crazy, disorganized, unreasonable, unfocused, too focused, not honest, too honest, impolite, too formal, too serious, or not serious enough).
- The firm (which is poorly managed, improperly managed, too top heavy, or not top heavy enough).
- The clients (who are too large, too small, unethical, too demanding, or do not care).
- The volume of work (there is too much work, not enough work, or not enough work coming down the pipeline).
- The other partners/associates (who are too serious, do not take the work seriously enough, impolite, too formal, or do not have lives outside of work).

In almost two decades of being a recruiter and speaking with people **DAILY** who have one of



the above criticisms, what I conclude is: (1) no firm is perfect and (2) the only way to get along is to “quiet your mind” and stop worrying about all of this stuff. It is going to be there wherever you look.

Throughout my professional life, I have been interested in meditation, yoga and the study of various disciplines used to quiet the mind. I even have an [isolation tank](#) in my backyard filled with 800 gallons of salt water that I go into a few times a week to quiet my mind. I have been to India, Fiji and all sorts of places where I have studied with Eastern Mystics and others. I used to own one of the largest yoga studios in Southern California, which I started because of my belief in the various disciplines to quiet the mind and eliminate the ego. I even took a course to become a Kundalini yoga teacher where I dressed up in all white and practiced with a group of Sikhs.

**See the following articles for more information:**

- **[Use Existing Resources](#)**
- **[Try as Hard as You Can](#)**
- **[Awaken Your Spirit](#)**
- **[Three Tips for a Successful Career and Life](#)**

I am far from someone that can teach you about this sort of stuff, but my countless interactions with “ego centered” attorneys have taught me that the number one thing that messes up their careers (time and time and time again) is their egos. They personalize so much of what goes on around them that they never are happy. This personalization of people, places and events sends them straight out of the union.

The ego is the voice inside your mind that is constantly finding fault and making everything that happens around you personal to you. It makes you take everything seriously and feel that your worth is somehow related to everything that happens around you. It makes you feel like you are the center of attention and someone everyone is thinking about. It is the worst possible voice inside of your head.



- It is the voice that destroyed the career of the plumber. He thought being part of a union somehow reflected on him on a deep level, and his individual importance was greater than the needs of his family.
- It is the same voice that also destroys countless legal careers. Attorneys start to believe that everything that happens around them is about them and they are too important to be part of something if it does not comport with their ego and how they should view themselves.

An attorney generally cannot change the system and the system is going to always be the same, regardless of how you feel about it. Wherever you go, there are going to be unreasonable people, unreasonable demands, crazy people and so forth. They are simply never going to go away and will be in any law firm or legal environment you ever find. Regardless of where you end up, you are going to find this.

I have personally known a lot of people who end up unhappy, regardless of what happens to them, where they are, or what they are doing. If someone does not like one job in our company, we transfer her to another she says will be better for her. A short time later she is unhappy again and so she gets transferred to another job. The process continues indefinitely and never stops. If someone is unhappy doing one thing, that person is generally going to be unhappy doing another.

They only thing you can fix, then, is yourself. You need to quiet your ego to be happy and productive in any law firm or other legal environment. It is your own self-centered and fault-finding mechanism that is hurting you. You are hurting yourself and that is what is holding you back and making the practice of law so difficult for you.

**See the following articles for more information:**

- **Job Hopping: It is Always About You**
- **Your Beliefs About Yourself are Controlling Your Destiny**



When attorneys are at the end of their rope—unemployed, chronically unemployed, unhappy, losing a job and so forth—they are generally angry. The first thing they do is start blaming others for what happened, and they are filled with a variety of criticisms for others and the environments they are in. I hate these conversations, although they are unfortunately very common. I could pick up my phone at 8:00 am on a Monday and probably have 3+ hour conversations listening to complaints from people all day. People love to blame others and justify why they are in the position they are in, but never are willing to look at themselves, or quiet their minds and stop complaining.

In the course of my career, I can only remember one person who honestly was accountable and accepted blame for what happened to her. She told me she had not gotten along with an important superior and made the mistake of telling a client that she did not agree with how a transaction was being handled by her superior. She lost her job and was blackballed in the entire city of Atlanta—the partner was pissed and told everyone he knew what a horrible person the associate was, after firing her, of course.

I was so impressed with her that I did everything I could to get her a job. I was just starting out and low on money. So she could go interview in a variety of cities, I literally transferred all of my frequent flier miles to her (that I had been saving since I was young). She is now a successful attorney in Silicon Valley and she plays by the rules. She is well-known, respected and learned a lesson and corrected herself.

The work you do is never about you. It is about the client, your superiors, your group—your profession. Here are four union-like rules that all law firms follow, along with specific advice on what you must do to stay employed as an attorney. Not adhering to these four rules will get you kicked out of the union as an attorney and make you unemployable.

## **1. Law Firms Do Things a Certain Way and Expect You to Follow Specific Procedures**

A union maintains itself and survives by doing things a certain way and following a chain of command. If a plumber is asked to work on a union job and starts complaining to the owner of



the building about the way the union is doing the work, or undermining his boss on the union job, the union will stop giving that plumber work and will make it difficult for the plumber to ever get a union job again.

If an attorney wants to do something a certain way and the client or the superior does not want to do it that way, deal with it. Who cares? You are working for someone and it is that person's call how things are done. When you are the client or boss, then it will be your call. Until then, shut up.

***You should not ever get angry and vengeful when things do not go your way.***

Every day I hear attorneys complain about the people they are working for and how these people are unreasonable for one reason or another and the work was not being done properly. Complaints range from:

- Not enough time being spent on work.
- Too much time being spent on work.
- Bad decisions made about what to prioritize.

These sorts of complaints are unbelievably common—incredibly so, in fact. For whatever reason, they seem most common among patent attorneys. Regardless of the reasons for the complaints, they do no good. When their demands and other complaints about how things are being done (or improperly done) are not met, many attorneys start to undermine their clients, superiors and others in an attempt to show them they are wrong in the way they are approaching work. They make snide comments and find other ways to make their point such as getting other co-workers on their side against the client, superior, etc. Ultimately, none of this works and it generally has drastic and negative repercussions for the attorneys who start this nonsense.

There are other complaints people have, of course. These complaints range from parking benefits, management decisions, insurance, and more. I've seen it all.



Ultimately, none of this stuff matters. You are being paid to be a soldier and advocate—for your boss, for the firm, for your client. It is not ever your role to make the final call unless you are in that role. What you think and believe does not matter. It is someone else's business.

The role of an attorney is a protector, advocate and advisor. People have different roles in the world. The client is typically the “doer”, or the one that needs the advice and an advocate. Your boss inside the law firm is generally the “doer” as well.

Not understanding this important distinction is something that often gets attorneys into a TON of trouble in their careers and lives. They believe that they should be doers and in charge and making things happen. Unfortunately, this is not the role of an attorney. Someone who coaches a sports team generally does not decide, all of a sudden, to play the sport. They are a “coach” and someone in a given role. An attorney is in a given role and needs to understand his or her place.

***When attorneys step outside their roles, they are no longer part of the “union” and this creates all sorts of issues for them. The role of the “union” attorney is to do what is asked of him, not get upset about the way things are done and be an advisor. Attorneys are advisors and not doers.***

## **2. Law Firms Expect You to Not Say Bad Things about Superiors, Clients and Co-workers**

If a plumber is on a union job and starts saying bad things about his foreman or other co-workers, it will be difficult for him to stay employed for long or get other union jobs again. The foreman will not work with him and his co-workers will go out of their way to gang up on and undermine him. They may even get others to gang up and refuse to work with the plumber if they are on the same job. If the plumber says bad things about the client, this could jeopardize the work of everyone.

When I was practicing law there was a brilliant, well-respected partner in a firm I worked at who did very well working on other peoples' cases. I was pretty astonished by how intelligent



he was and the ability he had to take apart all sorts of complex information and reach conclusions that were advantageous to our clients.

Despite his brilliance, however, there was something about him that I found very, very off. He would sometimes say he thought a client was “trash” or “a criminal” or something negative. He clearly did not think highly of many of the clients and I found it very off-putting that he was willing to say such negative things about the people he represented. I did not respect it and something about it just felt wrong. Despite how successful he was, despite his intellect, he was not a good attorney and not worthy of respect. He was violating the rules of the “union”, which dictate you never say anything negative about a client or another attorney.

***You should not ever bad mouth superiors, clients or co-workers.***

- **See Your Success is a Product of the Procedures You Follow for more information.**

Sure enough, when the firm started to break up and attorneys with business scattered, no one brought this attorney along. No one seemed interested in him. He had no clients and none of the clients were interested in having him represent them, even though he may have won cases for them. The old adage “if you think it, you will show it” probably turned them off to him on a subconscious level. They knew he was not on their side. Perhaps this same attorney said bad things about other attorneys, as well. I do not know.

What I do know, though, is that this attorney wound up a solo practitioner and now is searching for “worker’s compensation” and other cases using a poorly designed website that is such a step down it is hard to believe. Here an attorney went from formerly practicing on some of the most sophisticated matters in the world (and with exceptional attorneys) to practicing law from home trying to get small, inconsequential work because it is all he can get.

I believe this is directly attributable to not following the union’s rules. If you want to complain about powerful people, they will not want anything to do with you. Nobody will.





When attorneys talk to me, they often have all manner of bad things to share with me about their superiors and co-workers. These stories run the gamut and the content of them really does not matter. I've heard attorneys complain about the sex life of other attorneys and superiors. I once called an attorney at 5:00 pm on a Friday night about a new job opening. At 8:00 pm I was still on the phone with that attorney and realized he had been complaining non-stop for the last three hours about co-workers, secretaries, clients and superiors.

"You can't make this stuff up!" he told me.

None of this stuff matters. The more attorneys get caught up in it, the more harm they will do to their careers. This is a horrible idea all around.

The reason saying negative things about your co-workers is so harmful, and fatally stupid, is because when you do this the co-workers usually figure out how you really feel about them. They will stop trusting you and be suspicious of you. You have then demonstrated that you are someone who is not part of the group and will not protect the group. You are no longer part of the union.

Also, this negative view of your co-workers and others does nothing to make you a happier or more productive person. It increases your negative energy, which saps your enjoyment of your existing job and hurts those around you as well. You become a "cancer" to the organization that ends up dragging everyone around you down, creates a negative environment, increases turnover in the organization and hurts the service the firm's clients receive.

**See the following articles for more information:**

- **Concentrate on the Positive, Not the Negative**
- **The Power of the Positive**
- **Surround Yourself with Positive People**
- **The Top Five Ways to Be Positive (When Everyone and Everything around You is Bringing You Down)**



Attorneys who survive and thrive in legal environments rarely—if ever—say anything negative about others. In fact, they refuse to be part of any negative conversation, and if something comes up they simply smile, walk away, or do not participate in the conversation. When I think back on my legal career, all of the gossipers and others that I encountered are all gone and no longer practicing. The attorneys who refused to participate in this nonsense are all partners and doing well. Based on my experience and observations, this is a fundamental component to successfully remaining part of the legal profession.

I frequently come across attorneys who have been unemployed for a substantial length of time, despite having stellar resumes. They have great law schools and great employment experience. Early in my career, I used to be “blinded” by this sort of information and not understand why the person was unemployed for so long. Generally, I would pick up the phone and within a few minutes, start to understand why this person was unemployed: All they would do was share negative information about their prior employer, co-workers and others. If I attempted to interest firms in these people, the firms had already blackballed him or her. The negative aspect of this attorney’s personality was too much and no one wanted anything to do with them.

One time, I hired one of these people. I could not believe that no one was interested in someone with such great qualifications. Within a few weeks, my new hire started forwarding me all of these negative comments they were writing on blogs about their former firm. Then my new hire started saying negative things to me about my employees. Then I fired the person, which prompted this person to write negative things online about me.

Attorneys who bad mouth co-workers, clients, and their superiors should not be part of a “union”.

***If a union plumber is saying negative things about other plumbers he works with, they will very soon not want anything to do with him. The foreman will not want that plumber poisoning his employees against him, the company and others. The other plumbers will not want negative information spread about them. The company the***



***plumber works for will not want the union to get a bad reputation for saying bad things about their clients.***

### **3. Law Firms Expect You to Accept Work that is Given to You Whenever It is Available**

If a union plumber is called to work on a job and chooses not to do the work, he will not be the first choice when work is available again. I used to be a contractor and ran a large group of people. If I called someone to do a job and that person was unavailable or unwilling to work on a given day, that person would generally not be my first choice the next time I had a job available. I would call the person who wanted to work.

If a union has a job and the person it hires for the job does not appear enthusiastic or excited about the job, then that person is not going to be called the next time work is available. Work is given to people who are willing to do work and who do the work with enthusiasm. A client wants an attorney who is excited about doing the work and your superiors want to give work to people who are excited about the work as well.

***You should never turn work down or appear unwilling to do work.***

In a law firm, if you appear unwilling to work weekends, or someone gets the sense that you are not willing to do work for them, the next time around, you will not be chosen for work in the future. It will go to someone who wants to do the work and who is willing to do the work. If you complain, or do not appear enthusiastic, you will not be given work in the future.

- **See [Take this GIFT for Granted and Your Legal Career Will Be Dead](#) for more information.**

I have seen attorneys literally “frozen out” and given no work because of their attitude. Early in my career, I literally saw one attorney practically go crazy. The law firm I worked in allowed other associates to key in someone’s phone extension and pull up an attorney’s billable hours and see how much that attorney worked. Other associates seemed interested in checking



each other's hours daily and then gossiping about it.

One attorney in our office had not had any work whatsoever for over a full year. He had gone into work each day, closed the door and sat there with nothing to do—while everyone around him was incredibly busy. He had apparently turned down work from a partner and also acted put out when he received an assignment that he did not like from another partner. That was all it took to end his career in the law firm. No one had any interest in giving him work, and the gossip mill among partners moved quickly to freeze him out of all work.

One day I saw him in the hall.

“What’s going on?” I asked him.

“I’ve got a summary judgment motion due in three hours and after that I’ve got two ex-parte motions due for a trial next week. I’m swamped.”

It was complete B.S. of course. The attorney had lost his mind, and everyone knew it. It was a sad, bizarre chapter in a career for someone who had gone to a top five law school and done very well there and, from all accounts, did excellent work when people assigned it to him.

One of the biggest mistakes that attorneys make is not taking assignments when they come and not being enthusiastic when they get these assignments. You have to take work when it is given and you have to do every assignment you are given.

I have known more attorneys than I can count whose careers came crashing down when they started giving people an attitude about work they were doing.

- One highly-qualified attorney at an ultra-prestigious firm felt she was given a role in a very large transaction that was beneath her and complained to a superior. She was promptly removed from the transaction and “frozen out” of future work.
- One litigator was given a role of doing collections for the law firm for a few months (filing



various lawsuits to collect unpaid legal fees). He complained and made a big stink and was frozen out.

- One attorney was asked to help a billionaire client fight with his neighbor over a small dispute regarding a permit for a pool and complained to the client and the partner who worked for the client. The attorney was fired.

You need to do whatever is asked of you, whenever it is asked of you, with enthusiasm. If you are unwilling to do this, you will soon have no work to do.

- See **Love Your Work and the People Who Give It to You** for more information.

***A union expects its members to do the work they are given whenever it is available. If someone turns down work or does not do it with enthusiasm (i.e., complains), that member will not be called or given additional work. Every good union member understands that work is a gift, and they do whatever they can to keep the work coming and appreciate the work that they have.***

#### **4. Law Firms Expect You to Never Admit Any Weaknesses**

In my former life as an asphalt contractor, I used to do what is called hot tar work on roads and parking lots. This work involved heating up giant blocks of tar in an oil jacketed tank and then taking the tar and putting it in cracks to fill them in and protect them from the elements.

One day, I was outside with a crew of day laborers doing a parking lot and something went terribly wrong. Somehow the oil jacket in the tank caught fire and this fire made the tank and tar catch on fire. The resulting fire was huge. It sent 20-foot flames and thick black smoke hundreds of feet in the air and could be seen for miles. Traffic came to a standstill in front of the parking lot we were working on, and within a few minutes the roar of fire engines, ambulances and police cars could be heard rushing toward the parking lot in the distance. Moreover, thousands of dollars of hot tar were leaking out onto the parking lot. As the tar hardened, seagulls were landing in it and getting their feathers stuck. We had to cut their



feathers and remove them from the tar.

“What the hell is happening here?” the owner of the auto dealership/parking lot demanded as he ran out. He was covering his mouth with a handkerchief due to the massive amounts of smoke.

I was at a loss for words.

One of my day laborers, who hardly spoke English, ran up to him:

“Sir, this is how every large job like this is. We need to make the tar very hot in order to do the work right!”

“That’s correct!” I seconded.

The parking lot owner appeared a little skeptical.

“Then why is all of that tar on the ground?”

“Because we melt it twice. It works better that way,” another one of my workers chimed in.

Incredibly, this series of illogical (but seemingly logical) explanations worked. By the time the fire department arrived, the fire had died down and the oil had burned off. They too bought our series of bizarre explanations.

My workers had understood—**INSTINCTIVELY**—that you always defend your employer and **NEVER ADMIT WEAKNESS**.

If you are on a union job and someone comes up and questions you about what you are doing, you sure as hell better act like you know what you are doing, or shut up and find someone who does. If you act like you do not understand how to do something, you put all



the members of your union team at risk. They could all lose their job if any incompetence is exposed.

Attorneys get fired, make mistakes and have all sorts of issues and problems. Despite this, however, they never admit weakness—not to clients and not to other attorneys. In the legal profession, admitting any sort of weakness or incompetence is a huge no no and something that is frowned upon. I write this with a straight face. Since this is so integral to the legal profession and what is expected of attorneys, it is difficult to overemphasize.

***You can never show weakness about your job if you want to be part of the union.***

Attorneys have been going to court and representing people before various tribunals for thousands of years. They have been helping people with property transactions and negotiating business deals for the same length of time. Attorneys are expected to be advocates and the sort of people that are constantly guarding the rights of clients and protecting the client's interest.

I watch true story television crime shows all the time. When an attorney is representing a murderer or someone accused of a heinous crime, the attorney is expected to put on his game face and do everything within his power to fight for the right of his client, regardless of that client's guilt. Attorneys are expected to never show any weakness and to make sure that the client is represented as well as possible.

In the hundreds of murder shows I have watched, I have never once seen an attorney say even decades after a conviction "My client was guilty! I knew it!" The attorney is expected, in every single instance—regardless of the client—to portray innocence.

I believe that it is for that reason that the legal profession treats the attorneys who do not do a good job representing themselves and portraying their own strength in the face of adversity like **PARIAHS**. While it is fine to make me (the recruiter) a confidant for problems, the attorney is expected on the job, with clients and superiors, to be someone who is always ready to



defend themselves and not be weak. If attorneys portray weakness, they lose respect—very quickly and all of the time.

Your job is to defend your work and yourself. If you cannot defend yourself and protect a good image, how can you possibly be expected to do that for a client? The strength of an attorney, therefore, is related to her ability to project the strongest possible image and defend herself as well as she can. This, in turn, is a marker of the sort of attorney she will be.

I have seen numerous attorneys go off the rails to an astonishing degree. One attorney I worked with lost an important government post after it came to light that he had two wives and was a cocaine addict. Everyone knew why he had been fired, but he went into interviews and told everyone he took time off to raise his son. Incredibly, he got a job: Firms did not want to hear about his mistakes, they just wanted a plausible explanation that did not expose weakness. People have issues (some more than others), and you can recover from these; however, you should never talk about them. Once you start talking about these various problems with legal employers, they clam up and want nothing to do with you. You are **AN ATTORNEY** and need to act like one. This means portraying yourself in the strongest possible light and not admitting weakness to clients or potential employers.

I have worked with exceptional attorneys who committed astonishing malpractice and made other drastic errors when representing me. When confronted with clear evidence of malpractice, these well-trained attorneys simply did not respond and went dark. If it was less clear who was to blame, they always attempted to blame me. I have never seen another attorney in the same firm not take sides with other attorneys in their firm, even after an egregious error. This is instinctual, expected and what the legal profession does to protect its own. An attorney who does not play by these rules will not be allowed to be part of the group any longer.

A final thing is that you can never be a victim. This is weakness, too. I've had candidates complain they were not being hired because they were too fat, too old, too ethnic and so forth. I will be the first to agree that there is some level of discrimination in the legal profession, but





it always seems worse than it is if you are looking for it. Again, attorneys are **ADVOCATES** and need to be advocates for themselves and portray themselves in the best possible light. Weakness is fine, but you should never show it.

***The union expects all of its members to stick together and protect one another. Protecting one another means acting strong and like you know what you are doing in front of the client at all times. If you do not know what you are doing, you need to act like you do know what you are doing to keep the client confident and keep everyone in the group employed.***

## Conclusions

One of the most challenging types of attorneys that I work with is the attorney who has literally tried everything to get a job and has not succeeded. Within limits, I can get any attorney a job who honestly commits to a job search. I have gotten jobs for an astonishing variety of people, including those tarnished by scandal and more. But there is one type of attorney that rarely gets a job, and is rarely employable. It is the attorney who does not play by the rules of the “legal union”.

Ultimately, you are always working for other people. When you are working for other people, you need to play by their rules and the rules of the union.

See the following articles for more information:

- **Group Rules, Walking Off, Suffering, and Your Career**
- **Rules, Your Nature, and Your Career**

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