

The #1 Weakness That Holds Attorneys Back in Their Careers and Lives

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The first summer after I graduated from law school, I was a summer clerk in the Justice Department in Washington, young, overly confident, and thought very highly of myself. I figured that because of my academic success—and I was the only first-year law student hired into this particular Justice Department program—I must be special and I was doing everything I was doing.

However, after I turned in my first assignment, a brilliant, young, detail-oriented [Yale Law School](#) graduate in my class came down with me and practically went line by line through what I had written. He told me not only what needed to be changed, but what I had done wrong. He pointed out wordiness, improper citation formats, formatting errors, areas where I needed support for my points, and more. He also understood the subject matter that I was writing about so well that he provided numerous insights I had not only missed, but probably would have never been able to come up with on my own. My response to this first dressing down was mumbling something about it being only "a draft" and that I was already making the errors, inconsistencies, and more.

This was a massive shock to my confidence, and I did not enjoy it at all. My feeling was that it was an assault on me and it undermined my view of myself.

Throughout the summer, I had more and more meetings like this with a variety of other attorneys. Each time I did an assignment and had the work torn up, I got a little bit better. I started to be more thorough, review my work more carefully, and completely think through every issue. I realized there was a lot of depth to the work I was doing, and I eventually accepted that I needed to improve. I started to look forward to the criticism of my work and viewed it as a game--my job was to make my work so good that no one would be able to poke holes in it.

I am the first to admit that I did not get there that summer--but I tried. By the time I was a second-year attorney, however, my attitude had changed. I made very few errors and was in a position where I was able to find mistakes and other problems with my colleagues. I had surrounded myself and worked with the best attorneys I could find, and this helped me develop a positive psychology where I became an expert at constantly questioning my work and that of others.

Even to this day, over two decades after [quitting the practice of law](#), I meet at least twice a week with coaches who are accountable for my goals and evaluate my performance. We need people to hold us responsible and tell us what we are doing wrong.

Making Criticism Count

The people who are the best at anything question the quality of their work regularly. They are always improving and are [open to criticism](#)--they understand that it will ultimately make them stronger. In contrast, people who fail and never improve take the opposite approach. Instead of listening to criticism, admitting their weaknesses, and using them as a springboard to improve and get better--they end up avoiding any sort of criticism because they feel it is an assault on them and how they see themselves.

In many respects, it is a common trait among the most educated people that they can be criticized and have their confidence shaken the most and yet always improve. The least educated people are often those who are unwilling to have their work questioned. Many people isolate themselves in jobs, relationships, and even geographic locations to avoid criticism and protect their ego.

Lessons Learned in Legal Recruiting

For most of my career, I have hired and trained [legal recruiters to work at BCG Attorney Search](#). When I first start recruiting, I generally find two types of people: (1) those who listen, want to learn, and welcome coaching and criticism; and (2) those who already think they know everything, have no desire to be coached or criticized, and want to protect their definition of success. The best people for any job continually seek out the most demanding environments and coaches to help them improve. They happily take criticism or advice and incorporate it into whatever they are doing to improve. They never rest on their laurels and are always looking to reach the next level. The best athletes and people in any profession are those who expose themselves to the best coaching and surround themselves with people and environments that push them to improve.

Legal placement is a complicated business if you are going to be good at it. There is a lot to learn, and being good at it requires the ability to learn best practices and adjust your behavior accordingly.

Early in my career, I noticed something that remains true to this day: The recruiters who did the best were always those who listened. They never assumed they already knew everything. They asked questions and they would listen, listen, listen. When they started work, they were very open to criticism. They made multiple appointments with me to understand what they could do better. They would speak with others to learn how to improve as well. These were also the recruiters who succeeded at scale. They continually grew and sought out advice. They were open to criticism--and even more importantly, they were open to learning.

In contrast, I have worked with many recruiters who have not succeeded and, in fact, ended up failing altogether. They did not listen, and they did not learn. In a good economy, a recruiter can generally do well in the legal placement business, but in a bad economy, they can fail.

company assigns them people to work with, who they match with open jobs and end up making placements. The recruiters often get a false sense of their abilities and believe there is something special about what they are doing--they will be excellent at "matching" candidates to jobs--but they rarely succeed when the economy turns, or if they go to other placement firms where they are not assigned candidates.

In almost every instance, the recruiters who have failed at this company--when the economy turns--or at other firms--the ones who leave were the ones who thought they knew everything. These recruiters were afraid of learning what they were doing. They did not want to be accountable and would not show up for mandatory meetings with me to discuss their careers. These recruiters would avoid anything that would make them responsible for improving, simply to protect their egos. In addition, in most cases, the recruiters who failed and left were those with the least rigorous or prestigious educational backgrounds and work histories. A history of avoiding criticism and not improving was reflected in their work and educational backgrounds. They did not do well.

I believe that a significant difference between those who succeed and those who fail is the ability to listen to criticism and taking that criticism and using it to improve. If you are going to get better at something, you need to expose yourself to criticism and examination that makes you uncomfortable. You need to break out of your comfort zone and demand more from yourself.

What Law Firms Want

When it comes down to it, one of the unspoken differences between the best law firms and the worst ones is the level of criticism they will tolerate. Better firms will not tolerate mediocrity or people with a history of not listening to criticism or not responding to themselves to demanding environments.

The best law firms are not interested in people without the best educational backgrounds. Your ability to go to a top law school and do well there is a sign of your drive to expose yourself to the most competitive environment possible. The best law firms will accept people who take the easier route. But the best law firms will not tolerate mediocrity in education, work hours, work quality, commitment, and more from their attorneys.

The best law firms also have systems in place to make sure that shoddy work and unqualified people are not in the firm. If someone's work quality falls, the firm will expel them like a virus. The policing of work and people takes place at the law firm, and they will not allow anyone but the best people to work there. The product every law firm is selling is the quality of its people--their minds, commitment, education, and history of achievement. Without these things, a law firm is not successful.

What happens when the best law firms take chances on people like this? If a prestigious law firm hires someone from the middle of their class from a fourth-tier (or even a second or third-tier) law school--rather than a top student from a top law school--they are typically getting a person who does not have a history of surrounding themselves with the best people. They are achieving at a high level when surrounded by others with lower grade points, LSAT scores and so forth. This attitude is not likely to carry the same habits, level of detail, drive, and smarts to the law firm and service their clients in a similar way. If the attorney probably never mastered the LSAT or their grades, the attorney is not likely to learn from criticism of their work. If the attorney in the prestigious law firm will pick up on this and eat the attorney alive--they will be gone in months. For their part, the attorney from the mediocre background will not see the point in working so hard and will want to continue to do their work without criticism.

Even in terms of the qualities needed to get into the best law schools, there are glaring differences in the quality of students who can make it in the door at one school versus another. If you examine the undergraduate transcript of someone who got into Yale Law School, the odds are that they have taken all sorts of challenging classes as an undergraduate at a similar school. These high achievers have clear drives and interests that make their resumes much different than most law school students. To a lesser extent, the same is true of students who go to [University of Chicago Law School](#) or [Stanford Law School](#).

In contrast, you can go to [Harvard Law School](#), [University of Michigan Law School](#), [New York University Law School](#), or many other law schools by going to just about any college, doing very well there, and also excelling on the LSATs. Yet schools

continue to attract people who constantly succeed and proactively expose themselves to the most demanding environments.

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Leave Your Ego at the Door

If you didn't realize it yet, this is actually an article about what you need to do in your job search to get the best job. Incredibly, many of the best attorneys out there--the ones who consistently open themselves up to the most critical careers by working in the most demanding law firms--often fail to open themselves up to having their egos bruised in searches.

When you are [looking for a law firm position](#), you are selling a product--you. You are also competing with lots of people selling the same product--in some cases, hundreds of people may be applying for the same position. Whether or not you get interviews and hires you is nothing but a business decision. They will hire you if it makes sense for them from a business standpoint, compared to all of the other sellers who are trying to sell the same thing.

I was shopping for a toaster oven on Amazon recently. I reviewed the "resumes" of probably 50 different toaster ovens and chose one. It was confusing because some of them had features that were important to me, and others did not. Some were very similar, and it was hard to distinguish between many of them. Ultimately, I chose one.

While this is a somewhat "crude" example, the egos of the toaster ovens that were not chosen should not have been. I hope they were not. The toaster ovens I did not want were not selected because I made a "business decision" and the toaster oven was best for me. It is as simple as that.

After living and breathing legal placement for most of my career, I can look at almost any attorney and understand what they are doing wrong in their job search and how they are approaching things improperly. If they follow my advice, they may be able to work at far better firms than they would without my input. When it comes to legal recruiters who work for the same thing. The difference between a recruiter who makes five placements a year and one who makes 20 placements is almost always their ability to accept criticism, learn from their mistakes, and continuously improve. This is true in all professions.

When an attorney manages to get a position with a prestigious law firm--whether laterally or as their first job--they often have certain beliefs about their desirability. They expect they should only have to apply to a few firms to get a job. They believe they are an attorney of a certain level or prestige. They begin to think that they need to protect themselves and their reputation from rejection.

Early in my legal career, I was working with a [real estate attorney](#) in Arizona who wanted to work in Los Angeles. He had not passed the California Bar Exam, was working at a small law firm, had gone to a mediocre law school, and had not worked in a law firm there. Moreover, all of his previous experience was in-house, and he had only been working in a law firm for about a year. Despite all of this, real estate was in high enough demand that I knew that I could get him a position, and I did.

The attorney was making about \$60,000 a year in Arizona, and I got him a position in California paying \$130,000 a year shortly after I started working with him. Incredibly, the attorney was very upset with me. He told me that this was not fair and that the most prestigious firms in Los Angeles were paying attorneys at his class year more money. I told him that he did not have the qualifications to get into a firm like this--not yet--but after some time at the new firm, he would, (2) he would have the California Bar and the best law firms did not need to take a chance hiring him because they had plenty of attorneys who did, and (3) he did not have much law firm experience and the best law firms did not need to take a chance hiring him because they had plenty of attorneys who did, and (4) his law school pedigree was not even as good as the attorneys at the firm he was hired for the job with, much less the most prestigious law firms out there.

No one likes to hear this sort of thing. It was not nice of me to say it--but it needed to be said. Instead of taking this heart, the attorney fired me. He said something to the effect of: "I need a legal recruiter who builds me up and makes me good, not the other way around."

He did not realize it but I did believe in him, had fought hard for him, and got him a fantastic opportunity that more than doubled his salary.

Two years later, I looked him up, and he was at the same law firm in Arizona. I tried to help him and make him successful, but he wanted someone to build up his ego and it ended up hurting him. On some level, he may have also sabotaged the opportunity I got him because he did not want to risk failing in a more demanding legal environment and bruising his ego further.

Listen and Learn

Strangely enough, the attorneys who are more likely to avoid "ego bruising" are often the most accomplished. The offenders are partners with good pedigrees, followed by associates from prestigious law firms with prestigious backgrounds. These attorneys are often afraid to apply to multiple firms in various locations and are very nervous about applying to multiple firms at one time. They also think they know everything about how to get hired and how the job search works, which makes them back. When they are told what they are doing wrong in their job search and what they need to do, these attorneys refuse to listen. Rather than take advice about what they should be doing, these attorneys often simply "disappear."

Not willing to listen to advice from professionals is crazy. If I were falsely accused of murder, thrown in jail, and given the last person in the world who I would listen to for legal advice would be myself. I would hire an attorney who knew what they were doing to get me out of the mess I was in. There is no way I could possibly understand what needed to be done by myself. I'm an attorney. I've taken classes in criminal law. But I know my limits, and I would have no clue in the world what I should be doing. Trying to represent myself and make decisions without guidance would be insane.

When someone with experience tries to tell you the best way to do a job search, it is a good idea to listen to them. You need to take their advice, of course--but if you do, the odds are better that you will be successful.

Your ability to accept criticism, learn from your mistakes, and constantly improve is not limited to your job. You should strive to improve your health, fitness, relationships, and more. The concept of constant improvement is important in everything you do in your life. You should do your best to push yourself to get better at everything. Expose yourself to the most challenging things you can in every area of your life so that you become an amazing and extraordinary person. Allow yourself to be challenged by seeking out people, places, and more that will push you to be the best possible version of you.

As an attorney, it is important to realize the lengths that you may be going to protect your ego. You need to expose yourself to being questioned because this will make you improve. You should never allow yourself to become too comfortable with the odds are good that you are not growing. People, places, and things that stop growing eventually end up dying.

Conclusion

In business, I have always loved this saying: "Whatever is not managed will deteriorate."

Businesses that do not manage their people or set goals and standards for them eventually go out of business. Every day I hear about and see giant businesses that have failed because they did not question their business methods or their way of operating. They are overtaken by businesses that question the status quo and do things in a new way. Questioning the status quo is done is the secret to businesses like Amazon, Uber, and other runaway successes that put the old ways of doing business to rest.

As an attorney and a person, you are no different. You should always question how you are doing things and seek to improve.

who do the same. Accept any criticism you receive but even more importantly, learn from it. Constantly strive to be growing, and getting stronger--because if you do not, you too will be out of business.