



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By A. Harrison Barnes

If My Boss Gets Mad at Me or I Get a Poor Review, Does This Mean I Should Look for a New Job?

Fortunate are the attorneys or law students who find themselves in situations where their bosses are demanding of them. I say this in all seriousness and for several reasons I will outline over the course of this article. At the outset, I want to caution you that this article is not for the faint of heart; this article is for individuals who take their careers and lives seriously. You are the one who has chosen to be an attorney and put individuals' and companies' futures on the line based on the quality of your skills. So it is time you faced some cold, hard truths.

When I was younger, I attended a very demanding private high school. I also took the hardest classes I could get into. Most of my former classmates are quite successful today, leading in the professions of law, medicine, and other pursuits. I remember when I was in high school working very consistently almost every school night until 12:30 or 1:00 a.m. (at least) on homework. I also remember being just about an above average student and getting tons of criticism from my teachers - my writing was good but could be better; I needed to be more punctual about arriving for practice; when I did math problems, I needed to spell out the proofs of each problem much more carefully; I needed to do this; I did that poorly; I should spend more time reviewing the punctuation before turning in my Spanish homework.

In retrospect, I know that all of these criticisms I received were about things that were true. At the time, I think what I did is something we all do. Instead of making sure I was accountable for every error, I found fault with the teachers and coaches who criticized me, even looking for reasons to find fault with them personally. I even criticized my school and teachers to other students and tried to get them to realize that my teachers' and coaches' criticisms of me were totally unjustified. When we do not like what we hear, we often attack the messenger, don't we? This is perfectly normal.

When I went to college, I was still somewhat angry with my high school but took everything in stride. I did not change anything I was doing in terms of studying and continued working hard in all my classes. A mere three years after graduating from high school, I remember being informed by my college (a top-ten college) that I had been nominated by the school for a Rhodes Scholarship because my grades were so good. I remember being very surprised when the school told me they had only nominated four or five students for this award - I still thought of myself as an average student. College had been much easier for me than high school.

What I realized then and understand now is that when the bar is raised for people, those who try to jump over it get stronger. You often become so strong you do not even know it until you are competing in another field. The high school I went to was training its students to "go to the Olympics," both academically and in life. I simply did not know it at the time.

Up until a few years ago, I used to stop at a gas station to get some coffee each morning on my way to work. The

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gas station was near a public high school in Los Angeles, and the owner spent a lot of time defending his gas station against kids trying to steal this or that from his store. In addition, kids were always loitering outside the gas station, smoking cigarettes, passing unseen items between their hands, and making lots of noise. If I happened to drive by that gas station later in the day, kids from the high school were still horsing around and up to no good. I suspect this was happening at times when they were supposed to be in class.

I do not need to wonder because I already know the answer - if the teachers of these students were always waiting in the wings with one criticism or another of their students' work. I would venture to say that the teachers probably never went so far as to hover over these students and make sure they were doing their best. I doubt any of these students went to top colleges, and I am pretty confident none of them will ever be nominated for Rhodes Scholarships.

I am confident of another important fact, though. I am 100-percent confident of the fact that each of these students, if placed in the right environment, would be capable of great things. The right environment would encourage these students and would also raise expectations of them. What we believe we can do is very important. What I am willing to bet, though, is that no one had much hope for these high school students hanging out in front of the gas station. Because no one had any hope for them, I knew nothing good would happen to them.

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What would have happened to these students if someone had set goals for them and made them accountable?

There are very few people in our lives who will believe in us. For most people, taking the time to give someone honest appraisal is not a fun thing to do. People simply do not enjoy being criticized, and criticizing others is not a great way to make friends. There are also very few people who are willing to work hard to better themselves and overcome criticism. The people who can improve in response to criticism are the strongest people of all and the ones that great things happen to in the law. Certainly no one is perfect right out of law school, and anyone who disagrees is mistaken.

I remember when I was a summer associate in a New York law firm and the law firm gave me a stinging review that scared the pants off me. I could not believe it. I also remember speaking with the associates in the firm about their reviews at a big dinner. While I did not speak with all of them, roughly half said they had received good reviews, and the other half willingly admitted their reviews were poor. At the end of the summer, the strangest thing happened: the people who had supposedly gotten good reviews did not get offers, and the ones who had received the poor reviews did. (This was in the mid-1990s, when the legal economy was in shambles!)

When a class of associates joins a law firm, it is likely only one or two of them will still be there when it comes time to make partners. This could be one or two people out of a class of 75. The fact of the matter is that the 73 or 74 out of 75 people who are no longer there are most often no longer there

- not because they have been fired,
- not because the firm is a horrible place,
- not because one partner is unfair,
- not because the firm does not have opportunities available,
- not because working in-house is better,
- not because they have always dreamed of doing other things outside the law, and
- not because the work is boring.

The reason most of these people leave is that they do not want to - or cannot - change in response to criticism. It is very difficult for most people to confront their weaknesses. Most people choose to go through life not confronting their weaknesses, and this is fine. However, those who confront their weaknesses are the ones who achieve great things.

One of the largest problems law firms encounter when hiring new attorneys is that most new attorneys believe they are special (and they are). Having attended law school and been admitted to the bar, many of these attorneys expect their first employers to do a lot of ego-stroking, telling them what good attorneys they are and how unique they are, for example. I have seen this happen on more occasions than I can count.

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There is nothing wrong with this attitude. It only becomes a problem when the attorney or law student has an ego that is not strong enough to accept criticism. Unfortunately, law schools, colleges, and others do not prepare budding attorneys for the criticism they will eventually face, and they often cannot handle it. Yet taking criticism is a perfectly normal part of becoming a functioning attorney.

When I was practicing law, I often had opportunities to go up against more experienced attorneys, several of whom had been practicing 30 (or more) years longer than I had. I never lost a case against one of these attorneys, although, because I was young and just starting out, the cases were never that complex and my opponents not all that formidable. In these cases, I went up against attorneys from small law firms that did not have particularly good reputations. The difference between the work I did and the work these attorneys did was profound. Their work would typically be littered with typos. Their legal arguments would often be poorly thought-out and just plain wrong. I knew that in almost all cases the work these attorneys produced would not even come close to getting out the door at the law firms I practiced at.

When you consider this example, you should realize that it does not differ from the example of my high school and the standards that were established there. Contrast a first-rate, demanding high school with a poor high school. Contrast a good law firm with a poor law firm. The difference between first-rate organizations and poor organizations-and the people they produce-often comes down to two concepts:

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ACCOUNTABILITY AND STANDARDS OF PERFORMANCE

The levels of accountability and standards of performance an organization has for its people make a huge difference in the final quality of what is produced by that organization. The more accountable the organization holds the people in it, the better the organization is. The better the organization is, the higher the work standards of its employees and the better they do, no matter where they find themselves.

I recently read the biography of Jack Welch, former Chief Executive Officer of General Electric. In this book, Welch spends a lot of time talking about how when a company decides to elect a new CEO, there are usually five or six people who are top contenders for the job. The ones who do not get the position typically leave and go on to immediately assume CEO positions in other leading companies in the world. For example, the CEO of Home Depot, Bob Nardelli, is someone who did not make CEO at General Electric and then left to take his current position.

When I first read Welch's biography, I was struck by the fact that the people who lost the fight to become CEO of General Electric left and were welcomed as the CEOs of competing companies-it was almost as if each of their failures was a good thing. How could someone who failed in one situation be such a superstar performer elsewhere?

I thought about this for some time, and then I realized what it was all about. General Electric is a world-class organization that sets high hurdles for all of its employees. (In fact, I have heard that the hurdles that General Electric sets are so high that it simply asks the bottom 10 percent of its performers to leave each year.) When people come from a world-class organization that sets high standards, the world knows that the organization has molded those people into world-class performers. Again, the situation is no different than it was at the high school I went to. Because of the demands made on me, I went on to become as good as I was capable of being.

So this brings me to the answer to your question, "If my boss gets mad at me or I get a poor review, does this mean I should look for a new job?" In my opinion, the answer is simple: absolutely, positively not. Instead, you should consider yourself blessed. How many of us have opportunities to be pushed to higher levels of performance? How many of us are lucky enough to have bosses and others who care enough to get us to improve ourselves?

The natural reaction to any sort of criticism is to lash out at the person or the organization criticizing you. I think this is a huge mistake. People in the know will pay tens of thousands of dollars for this sort of guidance and to be pushed beyond their current levels of performance. CEOs of many companies will hire coaches for more than \$5,000 an hour to criticize them and push them. Olympic athletes of every sort generally have coaches behind them, pushing them every second of the day.

Is your organization competing in the Olympics? Do you want to be in an organization competing at the highest level? Are you willing to compete at the highest level?

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The next time an employer gives you criticism or pushes you along, remember that you have a choice. You can find a group of people who will never find fault with you, like the kids at the substandard Los Angeles public school. You can also choose to practice law with a lousy firm and get beaten by 25-year-old kids when you are a 55-year-old attorney because you never decided to jump over the bar when it was held high for you and never took the advice of those trying to help you.

I would encourage you to play for the Olympics, and the next time someone pushes you to improve yourself, smile, put your head down, and follow his or her advice; the next time you look up, you may find yourself on top. If you are like me, you will find the whole experience quite enlightening, and if you have character, you will realize you can never be more indebted to anyone than to the people who challenged you to be the great person you are.

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