



How Should I Act at Law Firm Functions? (Part I)

[By A. Harrison Barnes]

Once a law firm or other legal employment organization hires you or becomes interested in hiring you, there is a very good chance you will be asked to attend a social function. This social function might be a dinner at an important (or not so important) partner's house, a firm party, an outing—you name it. There are many different types of functions you may be asked to attend.

The law firm social function provides an excellent opportunity for you to (1) cement strong relationships with people in the firm, (2) destroy your reputation at the firm, or (3) accomplish neither (i.e., nothing).

After years of hearing stories and witnessing firsthand what is generally accomplished by attorneys (and budding attorneys) attending law firm and other corporate-related functions, my advice is to try to accomplish nothing whatsoever. I realize this advice may sound somewhat off-the-wall, especially coming from someone who makes his living coaching others on how to perform socially and otherwise inside law firms, but with some explanation my reasons for saying this will become clear. Regardless of what you may believe, developing strong friendships and other relationships with peers inside your law firm generally does not serve you well.

You Can Destroy Your Reputation at a Firm while Attending a Social Function if You Are Not Careful, so Go in with the Objective of Remaining Neutral.

I recently returned from a trip to Switzerland feeling somewhat amazed by the whole country. Switzerland is far wealthier than the United States, and almost everywhere things look much nicer. The country has a much higher standard of living than the United States does. Furthermore, Switzerland's citizens are not targeted by terrorist attacks, and the country is not busy fighting wars in far-off lands. There is a lot to be said for neutrality.

Like many countries, Switzerland could choose to become very opposed to other countries doing certain things and start imposing economic sanctions and so forth. The Swiss could speak out against what is happening in various places around the world and rally in the streets. But they don't.

Switzerland is one of the wealthiest countries in the world and appears to be extremely peaceful—more peaceful than virtually any country in the world. Enjoying peace and fostering widespread prosperity are two very noble goals.

When you attend a social function at a legal organization, you—like Switzerland and many other countries—have the opportunity to take sides. Whether you realize it or not, people at social functions will be watching you very closely and seeing who you associate yourself with. They will be trying to figure out precisely where your loyalties lie so that they can decide if you are "friend or foe."

There are factions in every single organization with more than a few people. When you are at a legal organization's social function, you will have the opportunity to associate yourself with one side or another inside that organization. You need to decide if you want to be part of a faction—or part of no faction at all.

You need to be exceptionally careful at law firm social functions. In my opinion, more bad than good generally comes out of law firm and legal employer social functions. There are, of course, instances in which

people get out of control (generally due to alcohol), sexual indiscretions, and statements made that are flat-out inappropriate. All of this happens, and I have seen these kinds of things occur at every legal organization I have ever worked for. The results are usually devastating. You need to be extremely careful at social functions. In particular, if you have issues with substances, avoid them.

Another thing that is important to note with reference to law firm social functions is that the person you are today (prior to long-term involvement with your organization) is likely not the person you will be after spending time in that organization. The fact of the matter is that certain organizations are more Democratic, more Republican, more intolerant—you name it. Coming on strong with your opinions early in your career with a legal organization can often produce negative results. If you remain neutral and low-key and just do your job, you are likely to be far better off.

When people have been fired from legal organizations I have been involved with—or when I have spoken with partners in law firms about why particular associates have been fired—the conversation generally goes something like this:

First, the employer will make some statements about the person's work and how it was not up to par. Then, the employer will speak about how he or she did not like the person, how the person did not fit in, how the person did something



inappropriate, and how the person was “not a good fit” for the organization. When all is said and done, I would say that 80% of the people who are fired from legal organizations are fired because they are disliked “more than a little” by people inside the organization. It is generally not because of their work.

You can do very well at law firm social functions by avoiding serious entanglement and social involvement. You should not be finding sexual partners there. You probably should not even be finding friends. Remember that friends will most likely expose everything about you to others in the firm if you ever encounter problems. Some may not, but many will.

In a legal organization, getting your job done is complicated enough. Introducing another serious element into the mix can interfere with your ability to get your job done and is likely to make your work much more difficult.

You Can Potentially Cement Strong Relationships with People at Your Law Firm while Attending a Law Firm Social Function, but the Risks Most Often Outweigh the Rewards.

People can make very good friends inside of law firms and other legal organizations. You can meet members of the opposite sex, members of the same sex, and very quickly make a wide variety of friends. In fact, there is probably no easier place for an attorney to make friends than at work. This is especially true when you are holding the first few positions in your legal career, including summer associate jobs and junior associate jobs.

It’s easy to develop camaraderie with other attorneys because you are working so closely together. You can have lunch together on a daily basis and spend a lot of time socializing if the law firm has frequent social functions. Social occasions inside

law firms offer opportunities to expand on these friendships and develop them. They also offer opportunities to damage your relationships with others at the firm.

One of the keys to being an excellent attorney inside a legal organization is that you have to be political. This means that you can choose to be friends with the right people at the right times, which can certainly serve you well. Keep an eye on political attorneys, and you will see how they can navigate the social landscape with ease, developing relationships with the right people at the right times and vice versa. Indeed, being extremely political can gain you access to better cases and work. Being political can also gain you access to more important decision makers who are in positions to further your career. Furthermore, aligning yourself with the right people can protect you in the event of an economic slowdown at the firm, at which time people may lose their positions.

Watching political attorneys at social functions is fascinating. These attorneys will do their absolute best to speak with the most important and influential people. They will avoid contact with people on the outs at the firm. They will laugh at the right jokes, and they will generally try to make the best impression possible on the right people at all times. They are good at steering conversation towards another person and then ensuring that some sort of plan or process is set in motion for future contact—a lunch is planned, a meeting about a case is planned, an article about an area of law may be forwarded.

There are people who are naturally gifted at this sort of discourse. They have levels of social intelligence that their peers may simply lack. Being extremely effective socially is a natural skill for these people, and for them it is a game, an art. Problems arise when people who are not skilled at this sort of game try to play it. And issues also arise when people who are skilled try to play

it. Aggressively playing this social game in order to climb the social ladder more often than not backfires, in my experience.

When I was in college, I witnessed one of the most interesting things I have ever seen. An election was being held for the position of president in my fraternity, and there were several people running for office. The election process took several hours, as the members of the fraternity aggressively debated back and forth regarding each candidate. At the end of the day, the candidate who won was the one who had largely kept to himself. The other candidates had been very socially outgoing and, in the process, had established close relationships with several members of the fraternity. However, this also meant their loyalties to certain people were known and that they were not friends with many of the other fraternity members who were voting.

Whenever the group discussed a candidate who everyone knew quite well, the discussion was lively. “So and so” had not paid for gas one time on a road trip. Another candidate did not treat his girlfriend well. Another candidate was not a good enough friend.

The end result of the election demonstrated that it is often better for people to know little about you than it is for them to know a ton about you. Also, if you walk into social situations at your law firm planning to make lots of friends, all sorts of things can happen that you may not expect:

- You may make friends with the wrong people and, therefore, upset others.
- You may come across poorly to certain people.
- You may end up exposing details of your personal life you are not interested in having widely known.
- You may overstep your bounds and insult someone.



You simply do not know what sorts of results you will achieve if you go into a law firm function planning to become very socially involved in the firm. All organizations take a great deal of time to understand. You will only understand them after you have spent time in them—lots of time—and even then you may not fully understand them.

I can confidently say that most of the highly successful attorneys I know are simply “nerds” and not all that “cool” and not all that socially adept. With some exceptions,

you are generally not being hired by a law firm because of your outstanding social ability. You are also not being hired or kept employed because you are so good at shaking up the social scene. When it comes right down to it, you are almost always being hired for your legal abilities—and, inside law firms, the ability to bill hours (lots of them).

This is not to say your social abilities are unimportant. They are important. What I am saying is that approaching a legal organization’s social function with the objective of performing very well socially is

not a good idea. Unless you are unusually gifted in interpersonal relations, the risk is generally far too large. It’s better to perform well on the merits of your work. If you can handle things this way, you are far more likely to get ahead inside a law firm.

As for attending social functions at the interview stage, just act like yourself. Be friendly and happy, but do not try to forge strong alliances. Be careful in all respects.

To be continued...