



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

[By A. Harrison Barnes]

You Can Choose to Accomplish Nothing at a Law Firm Social Function.

This statement is more complex than it may first appear. By deciding to accomplish nothing, you can actually accomplish much more than you would have had you set out to accomplish something.

When I was in my second year of law school, I attended a screening interview with a law firm in Washington, DC, for a position in my hometown of Detroit. I was scheduled to speak with an attorney in the law firm's Washington, DC, office for the standard 30 minutes; however, the interview ended up lasting several hours. I think this happened because I struck a chord with the 60-plus-year-old attorney who was interviewing me that day. We had lunch together, he talked in great detail about his wife and hobbies, and through my third year of law school, he continued to send me cards and other correspondence every six months or so.

About 15 minutes into the interview, this partner asked me what I liked about litigation and why I wanted to be a litigator. I spoke about writing, the (potential) thrill of going to court, how working in the area of litigation would perhaps even provide me with opportunities to make a difference in peoples' lives, and how I found the law itself exciting. The man looked at me, smiled, and said something like this:

"You obviously have never worked in a law firm. All of this stuff sounds great, and it surely is a part of the job. But from the second you walk in the door of any law firm until the second you retire, a lot of what you do will be about watching your back, understanding the politics, and getting the upper hand."

I was very taken aback by this comment, but I knew exactly what he was talking about. Specifically, he meant that in his firm-and in most others-keeping your position was more about playing political games than it was about anything else.

I was very struck by this statement and thought about it for a few seconds. I then thought of the person who won the presidency in my fraternity who did not get involved in politics. I also thought about all of the people I had known up until that point in my life who had accomplished things of great significance-all of these people were people who did not necessarily play political games and worry about this sort of social strategizing. I said something to this effect back to the partner:

"For most of my life, I have never worried about these kinds of politics and have somehow always come up on top. I think that people who play these sorts of games always end up sabotaging their own success eventually. I have found that just doing what I am doing the best I can do it is the best way to conduct myself, and that's what I intend to do when I work in a law firm."

The partner appeared to be very struck by this statement and told me that it was the most profound thing he had ever heard in his years of interviewing law students and young attorneys. He subsequently took me to lunch.

The following, I believe, is a categorical imperative for working inside a legal organization and for deciding how to behave in social situations at that organization:

Do your best in your job, and do not worry about playing social games. Be courteous and friendly, but do not get involved in politics-and do not aim to make any close friends. Focus on your job.

Not doing anything does not mean not being nice to people. Not doing anything in social situations means:

- not talking about your personal life.
- not saying anything negative about any of your coworkers.
- not seeking to make friends.
- not seeking to meet a mate.
- not "partying" and having a good time like you might with other friends.
- not getting too close to people.
- not pushing the limits of professionalism by staying out too late with your peers or others, acting wild, etc.

Your work life is your work life. Keep your work life separate from your personal life. Doing nothing means showing up, having a reasonably nice time, and not trying to push it any further-these are not hard things to do. Your reward will be that you'll be able to better focus on your job. Never let anything or anyone interfere with the work you do for your firm.

Conclusions

Social situations offer great opportunities to meet coworkers and spend time with them. Notwithstanding, navigating social situations is challenging because how you act will directly affect how you are perceived in your professional environment and what happens to you in your organization. Keep your work separate from your social life.

Young attorneys may believe that a social situation is an opportunity to demonstrate that they have great social skills, will one day generate a lot of business, and can get along well with colleagues. You can demonstrate all of these things without making close friends in the office or having a ball at social functions. When all is said and done, you want to be judged based on the quality of the work you do.