



Feature

A Fast Way to Torpedo Your Legal Career Forward or Backward

By Harrison Barnes

“Birds of a feather flock together. If you’re an eagle, don’t hang around chickens; chickens can’t fly.”



If there is one thing that can assist you with damaging your legal career as rapidly as possible, it is making the mistake of choosing the wrong friends at work. Far too few attorneys recognize this crucial mistake and, thus, end up torpedoing their careers.

I spend several days of my spare time per year interviewing students interested in attending the college I went to. During these interviews, I am continually reminded, it seems, of something that is profoundly true in many respects: the environments people spend their time in have tremendous influences on whom they become.

In Los Angeles, there are a few private schools at which an astonishing 30% or more of each graduating class ends up going to Ivy League colleges. When I meet kids from these schools, there is often a discernable edge to them that I pick up on before I even get around to reviewing where they went to school. These kids are polished. They speak with confidence. They are sophisticated. These general observations have shown me that the environment these kids are coming out of has a tremendous impact on whom they are becoming.

There are attorneys inside law firms and other legal organizations who are clearly and unequivocally on the way up. There are also attorneys who are clearly and unequivocally on the way down. If you spend your time at work and outside of work with attorneys who are on the way up, you too will gravitate toward achievement. If you spend your time at work with attorneys who are on the way down, you too will gravitate toward failure.

I have noticed a few trends that seem to repeat themselves over and over again in every organization I have ever been associated with. I noticed these trends when I was practicing

law, and I have noticed them in other legal-employment environments.

The scenario is as follows: Whether or not an organization is hiring graduates from the best law schools and the best firms or the candidates with the best records, people are sometimes going to be hired who do not do their jobs all that well. These people may be lazy and may not value their jobs. These people may have been fired from their previous employers and harbor anger toward employers in general. These people may be angry at the organization and at the world because they are not making \$1 million per year. These people may be incompetent and unable to complete tasks. They may have interpersonal problems with other employees. They may not be able to receive direction from their superiors. They may have been treated unfairly by the organization. All sorts of scenarios are possible.

Eventually, some of these people improve, some leave, some do not improve, and some get “sour grapes” and become angry with the organization. The sour-grapes response is the most common because it is always far easier to blame others for one’s shortcomings than it is to take responsibility for personal improvement.

Some sour-grapes people will also attempt to infect others with their dislike for the organization and will find fault with the organization and its people as often as possible. I call this “creating cancerous cells.” The people who find themselves in a circle of friends with a negative person will generally become infected with his or her bad attitude, and one by one, the members of this group will either lose their jobs due to declining performance or will leave the organization.

Those who are close to negative people inside organizations also tend to become negative because everyone tries to cooperate or compete with others in his or her environment. On one level, this might refer to one’s circle of friends, and on another level, it might refer to the people within one’s



Feature

firm. This is the same reason I have noticed certain trends among students from the best private high schools around Los Angeles, for example.

The Drawbacks of Spending Time with Cancerous People in Your Organization

When you are inside a law firm or any other organization, the most important thing you can possibly do is avoid “cancerous cells” and attempt to spend your time associating with people who are winners and likely to do well. Let me briefly review some of the major drawbacks of spending time with cancerous people inside a legal organization who are on the way out.

1. If You Associate with Cancerous People, Your Organization Will Assume That You Are Also a Cancerous Person.

When I was in high school, I was best friends with a guy who got kicked out of school at the end of his junior year for upsetting a certain math teacher at the school. During my senior year of high school, I asked this math teacher to write a recommendation for me to send to various colleges.

Despite the fact that I thought I had a good relationship with the math teacher my friend direly upset, this math teacher began to perceive me differently, I believe, after the incident with my friend. In fact, his recommendation of me was so poor that when I was interviewing with one of the schools I had applied to, the school told me it could not believe how bad the recommendation was and thought it “must be a joke.”

My high school later told me that this had prevented me from getting admitted to numerous colleges, and one of my other teachers subsequently told me that the math teacher had written such an awful recommendation because my friend had upset him so badly. He said that the teacher believed I must be guilty through association. Years later, as I reflect on this incident, I can see why.

Once any organization identifies a bad person, it instinctively attempts to discern which of its members associate with that person in order to identify other bad people. This reaction makes perfect sense. It is almost tribal in nature, and we are probably programmed like this on an almost genetic level so that we can avoid danger. When you associate with negative and cancerous people, your organization is likely to peg you as being the same way. Associating with cancerous people is not the wisest of career moves.

2. People Who Are Failing and Angry with Their Employer or Having Issues with Their Organization Are Likely Doing Things to Cause These Problems and Will Teach You to Do the Same.

People who have tons of sour grapes usually have sour grapes for a reason—and it is generally because they are failing. They may be failing because they are lazy, are dealing with turmoil outside of work that makes concentration difficult, abuse substances at work or to such an extent that they cannot do their jobs at work, are in jobs they cannot handle, or want to get ahead without working hard. There are many reasons people may have sour grapes. Regardless of the reasons these people are upset and have issues, if you spend time with them, they will teach you how to be just like them.

Once we get out into the real world, the people who tend to be the most popular and most liked by others are the people who have the brightest outlooks and make others feel good about themselves. The people who are the most alone are very good at doing the opposite.

Have you ever noticed that when you spend time around people who are happy, you feel happy? Have you ever noticed that when you spend time around people who are gravely depressed, you feel depressed? The same goes for enthusiasm and all other sorts of emotions. I have known people who have become wildly famous, and when I was around them before they became famous, I felt their enthusiasm. I have also known people who ended their lives, and when I was around them, I felt their despair. You become like the people you spend time with.

In school, if you spent your time with people who abused drugs, you probably ended up using drugs as well. If you spent your time around athletes, you were probably an athlete. The world works like this. If you spend your time around people who are winning, you will end up winning.

The Benefits of Spending Time with People on the Way up in Your Organization

1. People Who Succeed Start and Finish Things.

People who succeed do certain things and do them consistently. People who succeed are the sorts of people who start projects and see them through to their completion. Anyone can start a project. It is the people who start and finish projects who make the real difference. People who achieve meaningful success know how to finish what they start. They will show you how to do this if you spend time with them.



Feature

In order to start and complete projects, you need to exhibit a high level of self-discipline, and a lot of people do not have self-discipline. People who discipline themselves know that success requires consistent follow-through. The ability to follow through will rub off on you if you hang around people who follow through.

2. People Who Succeed over the Long Term Have Passion.

You simply cannot succeed over the long term if you do not have a certain level of passion for what you are doing. This passion is also contagious. If you spend time with people who have passion, then you will pick up on their passion. Having passion for one's job is the rule among passionate people.

Some people receive inheritances. Other people have powerful parents who get them the best jobs. Other people get lucky. However, over time, the people who succeed are the ones who have passion. Surround yourself with people who have passion—it makes all the difference.

3. People Who Succeed Will Share Their Insights with You.

People cope with their work environments in different ways. People who succeed and manage to find happiness in their

work environments have certain ways of doing so. When you spend time with successful people in your work environment, the insights you get from them will rub off on you.

4. When You Spend Time with Successful People, Your Superiors Will Come to Believe You Are a Successful Person.

When you spend time with successful people, you will also become associated with success in the eyes of your superiors (in most cases). Your superiors will perceive you as someone who is interested in learning how to succeed in the workplace. They will perceive you as someone who is part of the crowd of people on the side of the employer.

Conclusions

Select the people you spend time with both inside and outside of work carefully. Some people and their careers are going up, and others are on the way down. This is something you can generally pinpoint very quickly after spending time with people. Once you learn to recognize those who make winning a way of life, you too can succeed. In order to grow, you need to surround yourself with those who make growth a way of life.

EmploymentCrossing is the largest collection of active jobs in the world.

We continuously monitor the hiring needs of more than 250,000 employers, including virtually every corporation and organization in the United States. We do not charge employers to post their jobs and we aggressively contact and investigate thousands of employers each day to learn of new positions. No one works harder than EmploymentCrossing.

Let EmploymentCrossing go to work for you.