



Are You Doing Something Wrong?

[Jamie Barnes]

Some attorneys' personalities just don't mesh well with those of a particular firm. What should you do when this kind of personality clash occurs with your firm?

You've worked at the same law firm for six months. Work is okay, but you're confused. Why are people so slow to become friendly? They smile (sometimes), and then go about their business and hardly notice you. Various groups go to lunch together and only occasionally are you invited. The partners seem standoffish as well. You sense long-established hidden networks of interpersonal relationships but you can't quite figure how they interrelate and how you fit. You wonder, "What is going on here?" On a more personal level, you ask yourself, "Am I doing something wrong?"

Mark's Dilemma

After clerking with a federal judge in Ohio, Mark, 27, joined one of New York City's most prestigious firms. Mark attended a small Midwestern liberal arts college on full scholarship, where he played varsity football and was President of his college fraternity. Following his undergraduate career, Mark went onto Harvard Law School, where membership on Law Review was among his many accomplishments.

Based on his academic success and outgoing personality, Mark received offers from every firm with which he interviewed. He was the type of gregarious high achiever whom interviewers believed could one day be a major 'rain maker.'

On Mark's first day at Law Firm X, without prompting, he did what came naturally: he walked around to all the offices and cubicles and with a big smile introduced himself to everyone from the janitor right up to the

Managing Partner. He liked shaking hands and patting people on the back and chatting with the female support staff and generally conducted himself in the same breezy, care-free manner as he had throughout his life.

Mark was given a desk in a small office to share with a 25-year-old female attorney who had started just weeks before Mark's arrival. He greeted her with a big smile and hand shake and noted that she seemed initially cool but assumed she would lighten up when she got to know him better; but this did not happen.

Within weeks, he found himself putting in 14-hour days with his office mate. His personal assessment of her was not unkind. She seemed reserved, passive almost, pretty in an average sort of way, nice enough; but she spoke little. He wondered about that but said nothing. He preferred up-beat, non-threatening talk of sports and current events. He also did not like gossip nor did he participate in it. Given a choice, Mark preferred to think positively.

What puzzled Mark about his office mate was that she made friends easily. People stopped by her office often to say Hello. She would frequently leave with the same group for lunch. How was this quiet, unassuming woman succeeding where he, who had always been popular everywhere he'd been, was failing?

Mark noticed other things. The Managing Partner's office was at the end of the hall, and grouped on either side were various

partners, most of them in their mid to late 40s. There were even older partners as well, but they seemed out of the mix, off to meetings or sitting in one of the conference rooms with a client but not joining in much. Occasionally, he would hear muffled laughter coming from the end of the hall. The Managing Partner had two or three buddies among the other partners. Mark began noticing little cliques among the more senior associates as well. And some of the partners seemed to have favorite associates whom they visited with often either to chat or drop off work. His office mate had evidently become part of a group of younger associates. There were two women and four men in this group. As far as he could tell, their affinity seemed built around politics. They bantered and teased each other constantly. Three of them could often be heard talking at once as they left for lunch.

One day, Mark had an early-morning appointment with a client in New Jersey and returned to Firm X around ten a.m., two-and-a-half hours later than usual. The offices were dead quiet. Suddenly he understood. How could he have been so blind?

He remembered his first day at work, walking from office to office, laughing, saying something uplifting, smiling, winking, cracking jokes. Mark was not by nature introspective, but now he thought he understood: he had single-handedly tried to change the mood or culture of the firm. Worse, he had tried to do this not from a position of power but as an outsider, one who had yet to be embraced as part of the group. As a result, the group had



rejected him.

That morning, Mark consciously changed his behavior. When he slipped back into old habits he would check himself. He became stressed mornings when he awoke and when entering his office; but once he set to work, he would become calm for the rest of the day.

For the remainder of the year, Mark remained at Firm X. He kept a low profile, spoke softly, and stayed to himself. Before changing firms, he made discreet inquiries. The firm he eventually joined was known for its touch football games and after-hours carousing. He fit in immediately.

Deal With It.

The first answer that may occur to you in a situation such as Mark's is that Mark had done nothing wrong, that instead, the problem lay within 'the culture of the firm' or 'unidentified individuals' who felt threatened by him. Could there be truth in such self-serving explanations? Sure, but this is beside the point.

You can blame external systems of social organization for your difficulties or you can tell yourself that whatever is going on at a firm is your responsibility to figure out, solve the problem and make yourself a home here. Otherwise, you'll have to leave. Social systems, by their implicit nature are too big and complex for one person to bring down. That's the point of them -they are constructs built for the sole purpose of producing work and otherwise accommodating while controlling the worker, who either accepts this control and plays by the system's rules, is isolated, quits, or is expelled.

Micro societies such as Law Firm X tend to set themselves up in both hierarchical and rhizoid fashion. Law-firm social networks are rhizoid in the sense that they tend to link and extend in ad hoc ways much as does the always-under-construction tunnel system of prairie gophers. Tunnels may get abandoned but they

are remembered and influence where new tunnels are constructed.

Law firms also are hierarchical in the sense that they traditionally employ top-down authority with vaguely defined but informally recognized levels of influence based on the relative billings of individual attorneys and/or their emotional closeness to or influence on the center of power.

Any time you join a new firm or find your work situation changed by a switch in practice areas or a change in office location, you must re-examine how you are positioned in this hierarchical and rhizoid societal structure. Once you figure out what's going on, you can then figure out how to solidify and hopefully grow your significance.

Working within any group requires sensitivity to others and to the general culture. People create culture, and people are chosen because they seem to fit. In Mark's case, a mistake was made. Law Firm X realized this quickly but did nothing officially. It did not have to. Instead, Law Firm X let the normal functioning of its culture solve the problem: The culture isolated Mark and Mark left.