



My Lesson from the Missionaries

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago, I was working at a [law firm](#) and virtually from the moment I arrived a woman I'll call "Linda" used to come into my office for a few hours a day to talk. Her topic? How bad things were at the law firm.

She would share one rumor after the other about how many bad things were going on at the law firm. I was treated to information about allegedly corrupt activities, affairs, who did not like who, incredible insights into who was about to be fired, what different people had said to her, and more. Most of these conversations would occur behind closed doors. After she left, I often wondered to myself what I was doing at such a horrible law firm.

Her visits would always leave me a little depressed. I wondered what I was doing with my life, associating with and being involved with such a horrible group of people. I had actually joined the law firm thinking it was a great place and in many respects, it was. I was able to push aside what Linda was talking about generally about 45 minutes after she left and continue to enthusiastically pursue my job the best I could.

When I would get back to work not more than an hour or two later the phone would ring and it was Linda.

"Guess what?" she would say. She would then proceed to relay to me another rumor of some sort.

I even made pretty good friends with Linda, and these meetings eventually turned into conversations where she started telling me about men in the office she was interested in, the antidepressants she was taking, and who she had previously been involved with. On the weekends she would call me, and my fiancé at the time would hand me the phone as Linda relayed yet another rumor about the law firm she learned about over the weekend. I have no idea how Linda managed to get any work done at the law firm. I also had no idea why she had chosen to come to work there. She was literally spending every spare moment gossiping about how bad the law firm was.

Then Linda started going on interviews with various employers. She was very well-spoken, had gone to the #1 ranked [law school](#) in the country at the time, and was quite attractive. She very quickly got numerous job offers. She then gave notice at the law firm and if I recall correctly she "let the law firm have it" in terms of telling them everything she thought was wrong with them. Her "vent" was pretty epic and involved all sorts of observations as well as deep psychological-type analyses of her supervisors and others, which left the powers that be in the law firm stunned. After this incredible episode she still wanted me to pal around the law firm with her by sitting with her in the law firm library and walking past the offices of the same partners in the law firm she had bitterly put down when she resigned. This was all too much for me. She had really upset a lot of people.

"Linda," I told her, "This place is not really that bad. I think you have just been making it bad by looking for all of the bad stuff. Everyone is really upset with you right now. I am trying to have a career here. I'd really appreciate it if you didn't hang out with me all the time at work. I need to hold on to my job. I'm getting married soon and will have a wife to support, a mortgage to pay, and other responsibilities. I really cannot afford to be associated with this."

I had reached this decision because I knew my association with Linda was really hurting me. I knew her attitude was casting a negative light on me to some extent. Looking around me at the law firm, I could see numerous people who had been there for decades. Could the place be so bad if there were people who had managed to work at the same place for so long? I knew the answer to this particular question was "no" and that much of what was being seen was simply through Linda's eyes.

How do you think it makes you feel about your job if someone is coming in a couple of times a day and telling you how awful your workplace is? What if your phone were ringing off the hook with gossip about your co-workers? Even if these things were true, do you think this does you any good?

There are generally people in all organizations who seem dedicated to walking around spreading rumors of doom and gloom. I have witnessed it throughout my career--even in organizations that were doing well. I wonder how these people get any work done. It seems more like these people are involved in a soap opera than anything else. They are constantly doing everything within their power to spread fear among their co-workers. I certainly witnessed this sort of thing when I was working there. It is going on everywhere.

Several years later, I was attending a wedding in rural Utah about 90 minutes outside of Provo. My cousin was marrying a lovely woman from this area who had moved to New York City to become an on-air [news anchor](#) at a local television station. The videographer walked up to me and started talking to me.

"I've done only a few weddings for 12 year-old girls, about twice as many for 13 year-old girls," he told me. "I've done many 14 year-old weddings. I just did one last week," he told me gruffly and matter-of-factly. He was referring to the fact that older men were marrying women at that age. I would learn later in the evening that some of the men getting married to these 14 year-old girls not only had 5+ other wives, but also that many of them were in their 50s. Videotaping the weddings of young girls to older men was a very normal thing to him. I could not believe it. You hear about this sort of stuff on television and in the movies but I did not realize how prevalent this actually was. I was mesmerized by this particular conversation and others that led me to question if I was really in part of the United States. You can learn so much by talking to people, especially in rural Utah.

As the man and I continued to speak, he told me that he was very involved with the county and the workforce services part of the county. In fact, he was in charge of recruiting employers from out-of-state to come to his county to hire people. He explained to me many people chose to live in this part of the country because of their Mormon faith. He said many of them actually go away to schools like Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) then come back because family is so important in their religion. He then explained there were incredibly talented people in the county who were interested in working for sophisticated companies. This was music to my ears. I really liked the people I was meeting because they were

much more wholesome than the people I was accustomed to dealing with in Los Angeles.

I had also had an experience several years ago with some Mormon missionaries that made me decide I would do whatever I could to help Mormons in the future.

I had been living in Bay City, Michigan, working for a federal judge and one Saturday while I was watching a football game and immersed in a bowl of Doritos with a bunch of empty Diet Cokes in front of me, I heard the doorbell ring. I did not have a lot of friends in Bay City and was eager for any company I could get.

Into my apartment walked two of the nicest guys I had ever met. They had name tags on, white starched shirts, and little black bicycles. I let them in and they gave me a Bible and some literature. At the time, my fiancé was out of town, and I was pretty bored and enjoyed the company. They told me they would stop back in a couple of days to talk to me some more.

After a couple more visits, during which they related to me fascinating information about their religion, they gave me an ultimatum. I really liked these guys and Mormonism sounded great. I grew up Episcopalian and at the time I was not too happy with the religion. My uncle is actually a pretty famous Episcopal Priest and had agreed to officiate my wedding which was scheduled to happen in about six months. Then he'd told me he didn't want to because he disliked my father. This was really a bit too much for me. I thought religions were supposed to be about peace and love. These Mormon guys were very likable. What I liked best about their religion was they promised me if I converted, after I died I would get my own planet with my wife and children. Listening to stuff like this really fascinated me. It was like playing Dungeons and Dragons--only it was real. I also liked their values, the structure, and felt it was an all-in-all great religion. I still like Mormonism to this day and feel a strong connection with it.

"We'd like to have you down to our church. However, before we can go any further with you we are going to have to ask you to have your fiancé move out of the house. You are living in sin and this is impeding your spiritual development."

"Are you kidding?" I asked.

My fiancé and I had been together for years and she moved to Bay City with me from Charlottesville, Virginia, and we were engaged. There was no way this was happening. I looked at these guys and realized they were quite serious. A week previously they had requested I not eat or drink anything (even water!) for a day--I obliged. They were also hinting that I should never drink coffee or my beloved Diet Coke any longer. They also told me I should be prepared to give them 10% of all the money I made. Finally, they told me I should never drink alcohol. These guys were beginning to get annoying.

I told those nice 18 year-old guys I appreciated their spiritual lessons but did not think they should continue. There was no way I was asking my fiancé to move out.

About three months later the guys stopped by again. It was spring at this point, and I had brought out from storage a 550 gallon tanker I towed behind my Suburban that I filled with asphalt sealant each year. To the horror of my neighbors it was sitting directly in front of my apartment looking mean and ugly.

I had been doing asphalt work since the age of 18 and was excited to get back in business during the weekends while working for the judge. The thing about this tank is that you can never get all of the sealer out of it at the end of the season. Because it snows in Michigan you cannot apply the sealer to asphalt then. The asphalt sealer in the tank hardens up and turns into a clay-like material. You have to climb inside the tank and scrape all of the material out. There are agitators and other things inside the tank that do no work unless you do this. It typically took me about 15 hours to do this each year.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" they asked after we exchanged some pleasantries.

"Yeah, you can scrape that stuff out of the tank sitting there," I told them. "Other than that I do not have any problems I am concerned about at the moment." I was kidding of course.

The next day I came home and apparently all the missionaries from miles around had come and climbed in the tank and cleaned it out. They did not leave me a note or anything. I never saw the missionaries again. I promised myself from that day onwards if I ever had a chance to do anything for Mormons in my life I would. This was an incredible gesture of kindness and I appreciated it. They had done this expecting nothing in return.

As the videographer at the party talked, I told him I was in a position to hire people. I remembered the kindness the missionaries had shown me and wanted to give back. The videographer told me how high the unemployment rate was, and I told him I would do everything I could to hire people in the town. A few weeks later, I showed up with several of my managers and made arrangements to come to the unemployment office and start interviewing people. We found office space and made preparations to shift a substantial majority of our operations to this rural Utah area.

A few weeks later, we proceeded to hire at least 10-15 people from the unemployment office. We rented a truck and went to Sam's Club in Provo and purchased computers, desks, chairs and tens of thousands of dollars worth of equipment for our new office. All of the new employees helped us set up the office. Metaphorically, it was almost as if my experience with these wonderfully nice people years ago had caused this religion to create this office sitting there.

A few weeks into the process, I started realizing there were problems. Most of the people whom we had hired had been unemployed for months, and in some cases years, before they were hired. The small staff I had hired on a mission of goodwill started talking like they should be unionized. An incredible number of destructive rumors started going around the office that made it back to our headquarters in Pasadena, California. The people we had hired often started disappearing for hours during the day. Absenteeism was extremely high. Errors were high. The office was sitting in the shadow of one of the largest and most significant temples in the Mormon religion. In fact, with the exception of one employee in the office, the work was the worst I have ever seen. There were other issues there going on as well. We even had an issue where a married couple was sexually harassing a young employee in our call center because they wanted her to be part of a polygamous relationship with them. When I heard about this, it was the last straw. The fact that such people were producing negative news and negative energy in addition to the sexual harassment stories was too much to handle.

I sent a couple of trucks from Pasadena and some managers to Utah and packed up everything in the office and closed the office down. The same day I decided there was one good employee there who was actually exceptional and kept her. She is still working here to this day and has risen to become one of the most exceptional managers in the company. She rebuilt the office there and it has been very, very successful. It is one of the best things I have ever done for our business.

What I learned from this, however, is that there are people who should not be hired. The people from the unemployment office were unemployed for a reason: they were cancerous to their organizations. People who spread negative energy and news are like cancers to companies and to their co-workers. One of the best hires I ever made was almost brought down by

this cancer. You need to be very careful about cancerous people because they can hurt you. Stay away and keep your job. This was an important lesson I learned in Utah. Today, we have a great operation there and it is filled with great people who have good attitudes. The company has learned it's important to keep only happy and enthusiastic people around.

Most of us are put in positions where people are planting negative thoughts and ideas in our minds. You cannot afford to be associated with this at work. Negative information, rumors, and so forth are like a cancer. They will spread to you and take you down as well. Positive energy is the opposite. Positive energy creates good and makes things better. The positive energy of the Mormon missionaries created the office we currently have in Utah. The spirit of giving they emphasized is something that has created millions of dollars in payroll for a community that is probably 99% Mormon. This would not have happened without their positive energy. The negative energy of the chronically unemployed I hired almost took all of that away. The rumors, innuendo, and scheming could have seriously damaged the company. While good always wins out in the end, you want to be on the side that is growing and productive--not on the side that is bringing things down. If you follow this advice, you will have fewer bumps in your career.

THE LESSON

You cannot afford to be associated with people who implant negative thoughts and ideas in your mind. Negative information, rumors, and so forth can spread like a cancer and destroy your life. Positive energy is the exact opposite and works to improve everything. Be on the side that is growing and productive, not the side that is bringing you down. Doing so will do much to smooth your career path.

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