

Find an Employer with Similar Values

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

In 1997, I was working for a [federal judge](#) in Bay City, Michigan. It was cold and I was working in a rural area that left a lot to be desired. Even the judge I worked for got the hell out of there when he could go to another part of Michigan. While the judge was a very nice person, the atmosphere had a certain inescapable formality from the way I was required to dress for work each day to other rituals that permeated the work. There were also some cultural differences that made it clear I didn't exactly fit in. For example, there was another person who did the same job as me, and he and the judge shared a lot of the same values. They were very conservative politically and both came out of solid upper middle class backgrounds. On the weekends, the people in the office would do things like listen to *Lake Wobegon* tapes, while I would eat chicken wings at Hooters and go bar hopping.

It's very important you share values with your employer and co-workers. The people you spend the day with should be quite similar to you culturally and hold similar values. I hate to say this, but it is true. People get into trouble in their jobs when they don't share the same values with their co-workers.

When I worked as a garbage man, I really tried to fit in. I didn't have the same pressures and didn't see life the same way, however. The people I was working with had been picking up garbage for several decades and I was a kid getting ready to go to college. Despite my best efforts, the people I worked with were never very nice to me. One even threatened to "cut me up" with a knife at one point. Working there was like being in a prison. I never told on the person who'd threatened me with death because being a "snitch" in this environment was not acceptable.

I was disappointed I didn't fit in with the other garbage men. They knew I was getting ready to leave and despite that fact they were earning a lot more money than me, they knew I was not going to spend the rest of my life on garbage trucks like they were. Culturally, and in many other ways, they shared values that were much different from mine. One of the reasons the garbage men did not like me was because I worked so hard. I would run between the houses tossing the garbage bags in the truck and always manage to get the work completed very quickly. One man would [drive the truck](#) and I would ride in back throwing in the bags. I worked really fast and got into amazing shape doing this. But this isn't what the person driving the truck wanted. They were paid by the hour and if I was on your truck that meant you would make a lot less that day. I think the other garbage men also started to become resentful because management wondered why I could get routes done so quickly when others seemingly could not.

One day I was riding on a truck and puzzling over why one of the garbage men had called me a few names when speaking with the driver.

"You belong in an office," he told me. "You have no business working here."

This really hurt my feelings. Nevertheless, this is how they perceived me. This perception was cultural and value based. Essentially, I was being told I didn't fit in. One day after work, the manager came up to me and said, "I need to speak with you."

He fired me.

"You can't fire me," I said. "I haven't done anything wrong. I am one of the best workers here."

"I know, but the drivers don't like working with you. I have to be concerned about them."

I proceeded to lecture the manager for a few minutes about why he was making a mistake and he ended up letting me keep my job. A couple of weeks later he tried firing me again. This time my mother called him. She was a [civil rights investigator](#) for the State of Michigan and had spent her career helping people who had been discriminated against in the workplace. Thirty years of working at that job gave her some incredible skills. After that phone call, they left me alone. Sitting alone at lunch and not being liked isn't fun, however. No one wants to be an outsider.

The fact of the matter is you need to work in an environment where people like you. You need to fit in culturally and be liked. This is the only possible way you can succeed in your job. If you aren't liked at work and you don't fit in culturally, problems will almost always arise. This is just how it works. You may have problems at work that will have nothing whatsoever to do with your work performance. Conflicting values with your co-workers can cause this.

Without getting into a lot of detail, I would say I felt stifled in the environment working for the judge. I am very grateful the judge gave me the job he did and the training he provided was fantastic. The judge is also a good person but the environment wasn't necessarily to my liking. Also, the cultural fit was so poor, I soon realized it was likely I'd be fired if I remained. In fact, one day the judge and I were having a discussion about my performance that I thought could lead to my being fired. At that moment I resigned from the job. The discussion was ostensibly about my performance, but my performance was actually excellent. The real reason the judge wanted me to leave had to do with the fact there was too much conflict between our values. We were different people and thought in different ways.

If your values are in conflict with your employer's it doesn't matter how good your performance is. Your employer will not be comfortable with you. You need to be working in environments where you are comfortable with the people with whom you're working, and vice versa.

After resigning with the judge, I needed to [find a job](#) immediately. My original plan had been to work in a [law firm](#) where I'd worked during the summer after my second year of [law school](#) in New York. However, the problem was I was expected to start in one year--not now. My job with the federal judge had originally been scheduled to last for two years. I had suddenly resigned about 11 months into it and I thought I would have a very tough time explaining to the law firm in New York why I was planning on showing up for work one year early. In addition, the law firm in New York felt a little stifling, too.

The absolute worst thing about New York was how I had to spend all of my time with my girlfriend's aunt and uncle. Every single night we sat in their apartment doing nothing. They played board games and watch reruns of soap operas and I sat there doing absolutely nothing. It got really boring for me because I had nothing in common with them.

Hanging out with her aunt and uncle if I moved to New York was definitely not an option. I decided the smartest thing to do was to find a job on the opposite side of the country, in Los Angeles.

In order to find a job in Los Angeles, I did a mass mailing. I spent several days researching hiring contacts, spent hundreds of dollars on paper at Staples and then I mailed my resume to every single law firm I could find in Los Angeles. This worked incredibly well. In fact, the phone practically rang off the hook with calls from various law firms.

To this day, I believe the best way to [get a job](#) is to do a targeted mailing. I say this from experience because it worked for me. I used targeted mailing to escape Bay City, Michigan and my girlfriend's family in New York.

A targeted mailing is an outstanding way to get a job for many reasons, the biggest being it allows you to instantly parade your candidacy in front of every single employer you could possibly work for at one time and get the most interviews and offers. When a mailing is professionally initiated, it can yield incredible results.

When I flew out to Los Angeles, I went to the law firm of Quinn Emanuel and was immediately love struck. It was an incredible firm and the people had all gone to the best law schools and also worked in large New York law firms. It was as if they were escaping the stifling environment of New York and creating their own culture. They had no dress code and people were wearing sandals and Hawaiian t-shirts. The people in the law firm also seemed quite happy.

I knew I was definitely going to work there when one of the men interviewing me was chewing tobacco. He offered me some and I willingly accepted. For the next three years, I would not stop chewing tobacco. I couldn't believe you could work in a law firm where you would sit in meetings spitting in a cup and flying high on a tobacco buzz. In one of my interviews, I learned an incredible story. Apparently, the firm had recently made a young attorney there partner after three years--a record. What made the story so unusual was what happened the weekend before he made partner. I was told he had been out golfing early in the morning with a bunch of Germans who were clients of the firm. They were all drinking straight vodka and ice out of giant plastic tumblers and having a riot of a time. At some point, he blacked out and didn't remember what happened. He woke up behind a Target in a giant dumpster filled with cardboard, naked, with a \$20 bill taped to his forehead. After learning about this episode two days later, the law firm made him partner.

"That was when we knew he was ready," one of the partners related to me. The partners and others I interviewed with in the law firm seemed to take this story as a sign of a good lawyer and looked upon it with approval. I couldn't believe my luck in finding a law firm like this. I received an offer during the interview.

When I got to the new law firm in Los Angeles, I absolutely loved it. I loved the people and I loved the work. While I certainly didn't share every value of every person in this law firm, I felt comfortable. I had ditched a different life and came to Los Angeles to work in a different place. I made numerous friends there I still stay in contact with to this day. The time I spent at the law firm was some of the best time I have ever spent in my life. This all happened because I found people who shared my values. The people I worked with inside the firm appeared to like me as well and I received a lot of positive reinforcement about the quality of my work.

This was a far different experience than I had with the judge. What this taught me is you need to be in an environment that supports your values and reinforces who you are. A good environment makes all the difference.

When I was in eighth grade, I was kicked out of a private school called Liggett in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. It was a conservative environment that required coats and ties and I didn't share the values of the teachers or kids. When I was kicked out, the teachers and others said I should go to a special school for learning disabled kids and they told my parents I would be lucky if I ever went to college. Two years later, I was attending a private school that was considered even better than Liggett called Cranbrook-Kingswood. The school loved me and told me I was "gifted." What's more, I ended up going to one of the top colleges in the United States and did exceptionally well. I was the same person at Liggett as I was at the Cranbrook school. What changed was the environment. One environment supported me and nurtured me, and the other pushed me down and disapproved of me.

Every organization and every person has a different set of values. Every one and every group values and nurtures different things at different levels of intensity. Different organizations value different sorts of things. For example, some organizations may value creativity over conformity. Others may value being adventurous over being cautious. Others may value supporting the worker over the corporation. People are the exact same way--they have a hierarchy of values they either support or don't.

You need to understand the priorities of the organization you currently work for or hope to work for. The priorities of a given organization are something that will make a giant difference in your success or failure. People tend to group together with others who share similar values. This is why Republicans group together and Democrats group together. If you tried to put a Democrat with a Republican, the chances are the results wouldn't mix well. Their values are simply too different.

The worst thing that can happen is when you don't know who you're dealing with and your values come into conflict. You need to stand for something and ideally whatever you stand for will be reflected in the employer for whom you're working. When these values are in conflict, nothing works the way it should. People and organizations have different rules for what success means and for the proper sort of behavior.

I cannot emphasize to you enough the benefits of working with a group of people who share your values. When you are with people who share your values, everything changes. Your contribution and your work is more appreciated. Most of the reasons why people lose jobs have to do with a values conflict. Most of the reasons people excel in jobs have to do with a values match. You want to be in an environment that matches your values.

When I speak with people who appear to be in work environments that support them, I counsel them to remain in their jobs--even if I stand to profit from them moving. Your happiness in life is about finding an environment and a group of people whose values match your own. This is something crucial that permeates the world.

Work for an employer who possesses values similar to your own. This will change your career and life.

THE LESSON

Nothing gets accomplished when values are in conflict, so it's very important to work with an employer who shares your outlook and values. Find a work environment where you fit in and where people like you. Value conflicts with your coworkers

can undermine your performance, whereas a harmonious work environment reinforces your performance and values. Most cases of workplace excellence involve people in jobs that match their values, and finding this harmony will change your career and life.

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