

## The People You Work and Associate with Can Either Make or Break You

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was practicing law, there was a partner at my law firm that everyone warned me to stay away from—she was apparently quite difficult to work for. It seemed that once someone got involved in a project working for this woman their career practically imploded.

-One girl (a graduate of the University of Michigan Law School) became a waitress at TGI Fridays after working with her.

-Another guy who had been making at least \$150,000 a year dropped out and took a job with Lexis-Nexis paying \$40,000 a year.

-Another guy became an outdoor hiking guide.

Several people just dropped out of the work world completely.

This was at the Los Angeles office of a New York law firm. At the time, this was one of two firms paying New York rates in Los Angeles – which were about 60% higher than major Los Angeles firms.

The people in this firm all had great backgrounds and were the sort of people you might expect to go quite far in the legal profession; however, after working for this woman something went very wrong. It was almost like they lost all confidence, faith in themselves and so forth.

There was story after story like this – and it was almost like clockwork. People would work a few months for her and then all of a sudden their careers would turn upside down. I never understood it—but it was a pattern that apparently had been going on for years.

In fact, after I became a legal recruiter I used to see resumes now and then from people who I could tell had worked for her in an instant. They would start off with a top law school, summer associate jobs at the firm and so forth, and then “boom” something would happen and everything would stop.

There would be a gap on their resume for some time and then the person would emerge in some job scarcely connected to the practice of law – if at all.

I always called these people to chat and I think that every single time I did this woman's name came up. Even years later the people sounded angry, confused and beaten up because of what this woman had done.

What was it that happened to people who worked for this woman? How was she causing them such turmoil, lack of confidence and forcing them to “drop out” like this? What was she doing?

This was incredibly interesting to me because I had such a hard time understanding how someone's career could implode so quickly. Someone goes to high school and is really focused, works hard and gets into a good college. Then, they get into a good law school and do really well there. They practice law for a few years and then –by the luck of the draw—get an assignment to do some work for this woman and—WHAMMO—their career comes screeching to a halt.

In fact, it is my belief that in a different environment those same people might have thrived. Instead, they wound up around the wrong person and their career and life suffered immeasurably. I am not saying that these people should blame their lack of success on their interaction with this woman. What I am saying, though, is they clearly were not prepared.

How could one person do so much damage? What was she doing that was creating so much stress for people? It seemed incredible to me that one person could cause so much harm and completely send so many talented people off the tracks.

When I was in college I wrote for the college newspaper. One year I was given an assignment to write a story about a student at the University of Chicago Lab School (a high school) that had won the most prestigious science prize in the country, the Westinghouse Science Talent Search (now known as the Intel Science Talent Search). As part of my assignment, I went over to interview the student's science teacher. The interview was quite normal in all respects until the end, when then the teacher said something that really caught my attention:

“This is the fifth year in a row one of my students has won.”

I then spoke to the teacher in more depth and he told me that there were very few years in his career when one of his students had not won. While I am sure this was a good high school, what was even more interesting to me was when I asked him if any other teacher's students had won:

“Well, let me think ...” he said. He then mentioned that another science teacher had a student win several years ago.

While I do not remember everything, what was clear to me was that people who took classes with and associated with this teacher ended up doing exceptionally well and winning the most prestigious science award in the country. Clearly, he was doing something with these students that others were not. I spoke with him at length and I remember that he said something to me about how he was good at spotting potential and encouraging people who did well.

One afternoon, while I was still working at that Los Angeles law firm, I was getting ready to go home on a Friday and the phone rang.

It was the woman partner everyone dreaded.

I went down to her office and was not very excited to be meeting with her. I got to her office and she seemed pretty chipper and happy. There was a matter involving the Ferdinand Marcos Estate and over 500-million dollars.

She asked me to stay the weekend and work on the matter. I remember doing a teleconference with some people in our New York office – and then another with some guy in Switzerland. It was a pretty serious case. I remember being up until 1:00 am that night speaking with some attorney in Singapore about the matter as well.

As I delved deeply into everything, I realized that it was enormously complex. It involved applying US law, Swiss law and also Filipino law. There was also a certain level of pressure associated with the case because there was a deadline and so much money at stake.

I worked for 6 or 7 days straight on the matter and after several days had reached some tentative conclusions. I tried explaining them to the woman partner and as I did I realized she could not understand what I was talking about. She could not concentrate more than a few minutes at a time and it took about 15 minutes to explain how each aspect of the case was connected. It was enormously complicated – in fact, I do not think I ever worked on anything so complex in my entire career.

Exasperated, she called in another partner in the office she was friends with and had me explain the case to him.

"I cannot figure out what he is talking about," she told him in front of me. "Can't we just get all of this reduced to a paragraph or two and move on?"

I could tell she was angry with me and, for whatever reason, had suddenly turned on me like she had on many people before me. I could feel her hostility and anger. It was palpable.

The issues were complex and I explained it to him for over 30 minutes. He took notes and had his hand to his forehead as I explained everything. Several times he asked me to slow down and asked for clarification on a given branch of the law.

"That is really good ..." he told me several times as I reiterated the research, how various things were connected and so forth.

After he had understood everything, he tried to explain it to the woman partner in front of me. He tried several times.

We could both tell she did not understand the issues and I realized that she could not focus enough to understand the connections that were going on. She sat there looking confused and angry.

(I did not know it at the time, but this woman had been recently "de-equitized" – meaning, the firm had taken away her partnership but still agreed to call her a partner so she did not lose credibility with clients and outside the firm. She was tremendously insecure and very upset with me for "showing her up"—even though I was just doing an assignment for her.)

We had a large teleconference planned a few days later with the American Ambassador to the Philippines, the CEO of a Swiss bank, a federal judge in the United States and others. There were several hundred million dollars at stake and the Swiss bank was looking for our recommendations as to whether they should release hundreds of millions of dollars in a "confidential" account owned by the Marcos' to a foreign government. I had prepared a 40+ page memo for everyone who was going to be on the call.

I called the woman partner that night to tell her I had completed the memo and could scarcely understand her. She was talking slowly and slurring her words. I could hear bathwater running. She was in the bathtub. She told me she would talk to me in the morning.

The conference call was scheduled very early the next morning. When I picked up the paper in my driveway on the way to work, I saw there was a story on the front page about some riots in the Philippines related to the matter we had been working on..

When I got into the office, it was on the news as well. I could scarcely believe I was working on something where my advice could impact these riots one way or another.

I went into a special conference room at the office. The partner's secretary was already there and also there was a younger associate and paralegal waiting for the partner and I. I was about 30 minutes early. About 5 minutes before the call I asked the secretary to track down the partner because she was supposed to be leading the call. When she got her on the phone she sounded like she might have taken a bunch of pills:

"I have some family matters I need to take care of," she mumbled. "You do the call."

I heard the phone being put down slowly and fumbled with. It sounded like she was in a dark room and could not find the receiver.

I ended up doing the call and it went well. As a young associate, though, I had no business doing so. I talked to these people for over two hours.

\*\*

There are many, many people out there who are enormously insecure, unhappy and worried about their own survival. People who are in a low state like this often believe that in order for them to be happy and do well, it is important that others are kept down as well.

I did not really mind working for this woman but I could tell she was enormously angry with me –for no other reason than doing my job and doing it well.

She was angry because she felt insecure by not being able to understand some complex information. Her response was to lash out and attack to show her dominance. I am sure this is the sort of thing she had done with a lot of people before me.

She had a political background and had done very well getting elected to numerous offices and so forth in the past. She had not gone to great schools and was bright – but not that smart. Anytime she felt insecure about her own intelligence, competence and so forth, her response was to get very political and isolated and attack those who made her feel this way.

Since just about every attorney she worked with ended up making her feel insecure, they all became the subject of her anger.

Politically, they were no match for the sorts of problems this woman could cause for them. The woman was a professional politician who not only stopped giving these people work but would use her influence to prevent other partners in the firm from giving these people work.

For my part, I was lucky. I had been hired to work with one specific attorney in the firm and he was on a month-long horseback ride in South America with his family when all of this went down. He returned and he kept assigning me work and the entire incident was behind me.

There are people out there everywhere who have the tendency to either make people around them rise, or make people around them fall. Sometimes the results can affect more than just a career.

There's a woman I know that seems to attract all sorts of misfortune.

-Someone close to her recently committed suicide.

-Another person close to her has become a heroin addict.

-Most of her friends are in various types of therapy and upset.

-Another one of her friends is currently dying of cancer.

-Her husband spends his days in bed and moping around.

In fact, lots of people around this woman seem to suffer all sorts of misfortune. This woman is extremely prosperous and attractive. She is also very successful. She also always seems quite happy.

I have not spent a lot of time with this woman; however, I've known her for years and spent enough time with her to observe how she behaves and talks.

-She talks a lot about negative rumors—and rarely passes on any positive news.

-She seems to embellish information and make it seem worse when she passes it along.

Certainly ... if people are killing themselves, getting cancer and so forth she cannot be causing this, right?

There are many people out there who have many ways of keeping others down so they do not feel threatened and can feel secure. They respond positively if people close to them are unhappy, sad and confused; however, they respond negatively if those same people are happy and doing well. Many people believe that survival depends on keeping others down—keeping others ignorant and creating problems for them. If others are unhappy and dying, they must be ok, right?

When people do not have a strong sense of self and feel secure, they feel threatened by others being happy, secure and doing well. Therefore, these people will often undermine others, spread bad news about others and create problems. People close to people like this rarely feel good about themselves because when they do they are often invalidated.

In your career and life, you should surround yourself with people who have a strong sense of self and are happy and secure. These sorts of people will help you grow and better yourself. You should associate yourself with people who want to hear good and not bad news. Finally, you should associate yourself with people interested in you wanting to do well—and who are not threatened if you are doing well. Those who feel threatened when others do well are the worst kind of people.

Whenever I think about all of those kids who won those Westinghouse prizes while taking classes from a great teacher, I ask myself how much their lives may have changed as a consequence of their association with him. It is clear that knowing this teacher probably helped give them self-confidence and encouragement that stuck with them for the rest of their lives.

In contrast, I also think about the people who have chosen to associate with those who may have brought about different results in their lives and careers.

Nothing is more important than the people you work and associate with: They can either break or make you.

**Read More About If You Spend Time With Negative People, Your Organization Will Assume that You too Have a Negative Attitude and it Will Hurt You:**

- [Surround Yourself With Positive People](#)
- [Plant Yourself in Good Soil](#)
- [Appreciate Those Around You](#)
- [Self Image](#)