

Harmonize with the People in Your Environment

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the most unusual candidates I ever worked with back when I was a job recruiter was someone who had basically worked for five different law firms in a five-year period. He had absolutely stellar credentials, having attended the best schools, and having worked at the [best law firms](#). The only problem was that it seemed he could not last more than a year at any place where he worked. When I started sending him out to various law firms, all the prospective employers came back and in no uncertain terms told me they were not interested in the guy. It was the strangest thing and I could not understand it at the time. On paper, the candidate looked like someone who would easily secure at least a handful of interviews. He was also very personable.

One day I was driving down Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles near the federal building and I saw a man with a giant sign: "KICK THE JEWS OUT OF ISRAEL AND GIVE IT BACK TO PALESTINE!" He was screaming at cars while waving the sign in the air to get everyone's attention. Incredibly, it was that candidate. When I recognized who it was, it suddenly made sense why nobody was interested in hiring the man. He was apparently a complete rebel who did not care to fit in with those around him. Since there is probably no law firm in Los Angeles without a substantial number of Jews in it who would be deeply offended by this guy's views, I realized this guy was going to have a really hard time fitting in anywhere. Marching against the people who are likely to also be your employers and clients is probably not ever a good idea.

Over the years I have seen many attorneys like this who, for whatever reason, make a decision to really stick out. They lose jobs and quickly develop a "do not touch this person with a ten foot pole" reputation that follows them wherever they go. Law firms want people who are going to fit in and simply get the work done. They do not want to offend clients. It is the same with any job--you need to fit in with the people you are working for and they need to see you as fitting in at all times. If you do not fit in and harmonize with others in your work environment, it can create serious problems for you.

Several years ago I hired an employee who came across as a very quiet library type. He did excellent work and was quickly given raises and increased responsibility. He was a nice guy who kept a very low profile at work and seemed to be respected by his peers. Apparently he had gotten romantically involved with a coworker. One day a few weeks after I heard the two had ended their relationship, the female coworker and I were talking about something unrelated, and suddenly she started saying negative things about the guy in a roundabout way, making subtle digs. I was not interested in listening and attempted to change the conversation. Then she brought up something that really shocked me:

"He has tattoos across his entire chest of skulls and stuff."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"He is covered in tattoos. You have just never seen them because he has kept them covered up all these years at work."

She knew this would shock me. She then proceeded to tell me that the guy liked to hang out at industrial Goth-type clubs in Hollywood. The reason she was telling me all of this was because at the time our company was somewhat formal and comprised lots of attorneys. I am not the sort of guy who is generally into tattoos and the woman could look around and see that I did not have any other tattooed employees, as most of the staff was pretty conservative. This woman was trying to get me to form a negative opinion of the guy and I could tell she was also trying, as best as she could, to get him fired. In essence, what she was implying was "here among you is a traitor!!" She was trying to send me a signal loud and clear that this guy did not fit in, and that he was not who he represented himself to be.

The girl did not stay with our company very long and a short time later the guy she had tattled on got a significant raise--and a year or so later, another raise. I was incredibly impressed with him and what he had been able to achieve. Not once did this guy come across as the sort of person who would have a bunch of tattoos and be interested in strange night life, vampires, and whatever it was that interested him. He was an impressive, intelligent person who, when at work, did his job very well and served as a role model to his fellow employees, especially the younger ones. The fact that his ex-girlfriend had seen him with his shirt off and could testify that he was covered in tattoos did not make the slightest difference to me. In fact, it made me think even more highly of him. He had managed to completely fit in at work and play the work role that was expected of him.

When I was in college, the entire time I dated a girl who was Jewish. One time she came home with me over Christmas break and we went to a family Christmas party. My girlfriend, mom, sister, and I had driven from Detroit down to Ohio to visit the family of my mother's second husband. We were in Toledo, Ohio, celebrating Christmas with this large Irish family in a very small house and at some point I wanted to get out of the house and get some fresh air. Down the street there was a giant church and I thought it would be fun to go look at it. My girlfriend and I decided we would go look at it and I informed a couple of my relatives that we were going to make the visit. It was about 3:30 in the afternoon and several of them were pretty buzzed on Miller High Life at that point. One walked up to us and said:

"Why would she be interested in a church? She's Jewish!"

"Huh?" she said.

"That's right. We all know your secret. What's it like seeing Christmas celebrated? Are you even allowed to go inside of a church?"

Right then and there I realized we had been at this house the entire day and although not once did anyone say anything about her religion, it was clearly on their minds. Try as they might have, once the beers got rolling, they felt like they needed to make an issue out of it. My girlfriend ended up laughing it off; however, the conversation, short as it was, made us both feel incredibly uncomfortable. It had been nothing less than a tacit statement that my girlfriend did not fit in and was not one of the

tribe. She thought the entire thing was pretty humorous but for me it actually felt a little menacing.

People around us are always looking closely to see if we fit in. They are judging us and making assumptions even when we are not aware of it. In many cases, especially in the working world, it is important that we do our best to fit in at all costs. It can become a matter of survival.

A couple of months later my girlfriend got back at me, albeit unintentionally. She took me to a Passover Seder in Chicago. My girlfriend had been raised a very conservative Jew. She spoke and read Hebrew and was incredibly well versed in her religion and all its traditions. The Hillel Center at the University of Chicago had a program where students could go have Passover with local families around Chicago. That night was really unusual to me; I had no idea what was going on. In the reading of the Haggadah I was unable to read in Hebrew and the people at the table looked very surprised. I managed to mess up virtually every ritual involved in the Seder. At the end of the evening, the man who had hosted the event approached me and started asking me all sorts of questions such as which synagogue I went to in Detroit and so forth. It was his subtle way of letting me know he knew I did not belong at the dinner, and it was very unwelcoming. I felt so uncomfortable.

Some incredibly awkward moments followed. Clearly this man was insulted that he had opened this sacred event to include a non-Jew. I am not sure why he felt this way and in my experience with Judaism this is certainly not par for the course; nevertheless this particular person was very angry. In fact he became downright hostile.

The following day someone from the Hillel Center called my girlfriend and told her that she should not have brought me to the Seder. The next year they also posted an "addendum" on the sign up form for the Seder, which explained that it was "bad judgment" to bring non-Jews to the Seder.

Throughout my relationship with this girl, she broke up with me numerous times at her parents' and family's request because I was not the same religion as her. Many groups go a long way to protect this ideal, because maintaining the sense of solidarity within their group is so incredibly important to them.

What these two events taught me--my family at Christmas and my girlfriend's family at Passover was that people are incredibly sensitive about people fitting in with them. And every group seems to have both implied and expressed rules about who may or may not be allowed to fit in, based on how a person acts, looks, speaks, or believes.

I ended up marrying another girl who was Jewish, several years ago. I had a Jewish wedding and during this wedding I could see that a lot of my relatives were confused as to what was going on. For most of my relatives, this was the first Jewish wedding they had ever attended, and for most it felt like a completely alien culture and set of traditions. I could relate to this because it was how I had felt too, before I had learned about and experienced it all first hand.

A month or so ago I was having dinner in the Harvard Club of New York to celebrate my cousin's birthday. At one point in the evening, my great uncle came up to speak with me and I noticed he had some information written on a piece of paper. He had gone to Harvard and Phillips, Andover, and was from a very old American family, out of which had come the first American Senator from Kansas (and the President pro tempore of the Senate)--among other things. My great uncle is a really nice guy who is always curious about various ideas. Recently, he decided to have some genetic testing done by some group affiliated with National Geographic. For the past several weeks he had been pondering the results: It turned out that his mother's side was Jewish, which meant that my father would have been Jewish due to blood lines. My great uncle was very intrigued by this, and he told me how this side of his family had come over from Holland hundreds of years ago and must have been Jewish. He was actually in a state of disbelief--not sure what to make about any of this information.

A couple of years ago I also took a genetic test and got interesting results: It came back that my mother was Jewish. My mother, of course, had no idea and for days sat puzzled in front of the computer. She had been raised in a small town in the Midwest and did not understand how her mother could possibly have been Jewish. When my wife and I went to visit her last Christmas she had put a Star of David on her window and appeared to be *going with it* in terms of what she had discovered.

My point is not to instruct you based on my religious learning and what I have discovered about my roots. Instead, my point is far more general and far-reaching. Historically, at least in terms of the places my family has lived (Michigan, Kansas), Jews were treated poorly and not given the same opportunities as the rest of the general population. What I am surmising is that in order to get ahead, what many Jews ended up doing is converting to Christianity and abandoning and even forgetting about their roots. Consequently, a generation or more later we find guys like me who, through the modern miracle of genetic testing, discover that they are actually Jewish.

When I was in [law school](#), I was once visiting a friend of mine with the last name Goldstein. He had always pronounced this name the exact way you would think it looks and is pronounced. One time during a break I was sleeping on a couch in his apartment and I heard him talking to a girl he was being fixed up with. I did not know the situation but when I heard him pronounce his last name to her I could not believe it. He said his last name very quickly:

"Gosin," I heard him say.

"Yes, Gosin."

I was not sure what was going on there but I got the feeling that he did not want the girl to know, for whatever reason, that he had an obviously Jewish last name. It made me uncomfortable hearing this because my friend was the last person I ever suspected would try and gloss over who he really was. But isn't this something we all do in one form or another to fit in? Don't we all at one time or another go out of our way to be someone we are not in order to be seen as someone other than who we are?

One of the most important things that society seems to demand of us is that we harmonize with our environment. In order to do this, many people will abandon their religions, cover up their tattoos, and do all sorts of things to look the part. While I am not condoning that people do this with their religions, this is something that people all over the world do in order to fit in.

Don't ask, don't tell is an example of a military policy that forces soldiers to fit in and harmonize with their environment. If you were a flamboyant homosexual, the odds are pretty good that you would not be comfortable working as a motorcycle mechanic in a Harley Davidson dealership. And if this were your chosen profession you would probably do what you needed to in order to fit in--and then you would be a completely different person outside of work.

One day when I was in college, I remember the President of the student counsel of the entire University of Chicago, who also belonged to a fraternity, was seen cavorting with another man in a gay bar that some of his fraternity brothers went into as a joke, when they were drunk one night. They were astonished to see one of their own frat brothers in the gay bar, brushing up to another man. For all intents and purposes, this guy had covered up who he was, and had never been his real self in public.

It must have been very difficult for him to have looked up and seen his fraternity brothers, realizing at that moment that his secret was completely out in the open. In heterosexual fraternities, you cannot really fit in if you are a gay.

In your [employment environment](#) and to get the jobs you want, you need to harmonize with the people around you. You need to be what they are and you need to go along with whatever the environment supports. Your work and how you are judged by the people around you will have a giant impact on your fate in the workplace.

I wonder if my great grandfather, John James Ingalls, would have been an American Senator and President pro tempore of the United States Senate if he had been known as a Jew in the 1800s. Today there is a statue of him in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, DC. It is one of two statues of famous Kansas residents. I wonder if any of this would have occurred if he had been known as a Jew at the time. When he was a senator he was a strong advocate of freeing the slaves. Perhaps a part of him wanted to help that part of him that was also suppressed in the dominant society at the time. My great grandfather was probably ultimately able to do more good, and to accomplish more in his life by fitting in, than had he not fit in. His son later followed in his footsteps, and became the governor of Kansas. If you saw pictures of this family, the last thing you would expect was that they were Jewish. And at some point they probably forgot or covered up the fact.

There is nothing more important to your career than blending in and harmonizing with the people in your environment. It is only by harmonizing with the people in your environment that you can achieve your career goals.

THE LESSON

You need not only to fit in, but to be seen as fitting in with your coworkers. Harmonizing with your work environment is one of the most important things you can do for your career, and failing to do so can cause you serious problems. Achieving such harmony, however, will ultimately bring you closer to your career goals, and is among the primary things that society demands of its participants.

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