

Avoid Creating "Fatal Friction"

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

The worst thing you can ever do in a professional relationship--and in a personal relationship, for that matter, is introduce what I call "fatal friction". I have seen more careers stalled, held back and even ruined by fatal friction than I can count. In addition, people create all sorts of social problems for themselves by introducing fatal friction into their social relationships.

What is fatal friction? It is anything you say or do that creates some sort of tension between you and another person, or an organization, which is so severe it is unlikely to ever go away. Once this fatal friction is there, your career, for the most part, will be permanently held back wherever you are working. You can create fatal friction by an inappropriate remark, an inappropriate action, by challenging a supervisor, by entering into an inappropriate relationship at work, and more.

Several years ago, I took a trip to Yosemite with a law firm I was working with. One Friday afternoon the law firm rented a bus, and a bunch of attorneys who managed to get away for the weekend all piled into the bus and left from Los Angeles. The bus ride itself was uneventful and on Saturday morning at 5:30 a.m. everyone got up to go on a long hike up Half Dome. The hike took nearly the entire day.

As we all prepared for the hike that morning, I noticed one of the older attorneys in the firm speaking with a very attractive woman who seemed to probably be in her late 30s. I recognized her from somewhere, but could not remember her name. I figured I had seen her pictures in a legal magazine of some sort at one time, but I was not sure. I couldn't help noticing that the older attorneys around this woman seemed to be acting very deferential towards her. For example, it was quite cold and she had not brought any gloves. A very important attorney in our firm took off his nice leather gloves and said:

"Here, take my gloves. I do not need them. My hands have a lot of blood in them and will stay warm."

I had no idea what "a lot of blood" meant, but this statement was very funny and I remembered it. The woman took his gloves and as we huffed up the mountain the man went without his gloves.

I learned a short time later that the woman was one of the most important attorneys in the United States and was currently the General Counsel of a Fortune 500 company. In fact, I believe the company was probably within the 25 largest in the entire United States. The law firm had decided to invite her along for the trip.

The hike itself was a lot of fun and very scenic. It was the end of summer and the firm had brought along all of its summer associates who were, at the time, between their second and third years of law school. They were all extremely excited about the trip, and were in much better shape than many of the older attorneys they were hiking with. The [summer associates](#) were also on their very best behavior because they were hoping to impress the management of the firm and get offers from the law firm to spend more time working there.

After a long day of hiking up and down the mountain, I finally got down to the lodge area around 5:00 p.m. and I saw many of these summer associates sitting at a table, drinking beer. I had been sitting behind a desk 12 hours per day, not doing any exercise whatsoever for the past couple of years, and was absolutely exhausted after the hike. In fact, after this epic hike, I think I probably lost around 10 pounds. The hike was one of the most tiring things I had ever done. As I trudged past these summer associates, I noticed they appeared to have already taken showers, and were ready for a fun night. I noticed that there were two pitchers of beer on the table. Three of the associates were sharing one of the pitcher, and another associate was drinking directly from the second pitcher--without using a glass.

"It looks like you're ready for a fun night!" I told him.

"I brought two bottles of Jägermeister for later!" he responded.

This young man was currently attending Harvard Law School, and without liquor in him, he was generally a pretty mellow sort of guy. However, by the end of the evening his experience in this law firm would come to an abrupt end as he, incredibly, ended up completely consuming those two full bottles of Jägermeister.

After dinner and throughout the rest of the evening this associate became increasingly drunk. The important General Counsel woman had decided it would be fun to sit outside one of the cabins with the summer associates, who were all enjoying the night. At some point, in his inebriated state, the drunken associate did something incredibly inappropriate involving his mouth and the woman's breasts. From what I understand, for the people there it was one of the more memorable moments they had ever witnessed. However, it got worse as the drunk associate continued trying to hook up with the married General Counsel woman--and berating her as she tried to fend him off.

The next morning everyone got back on the bus. I saw several of the older attorneys gathered around the General Counsel woman apologizing to her in hushed tones, telling her how sorry they were and so forth. When everyone was on the bus, roll call was taken and the associate who had been so intoxicated the night before was nowhere to be found. For around 10 minutes we all sat on the bus, until finally the guy was hustled on to the bus by a couple of other summer associates. He had not showered and was covered in vomit. As soon as the bus started rolling, he ended up vomiting again.

As one could imagine, after this episode the young summer associate was not hired by the firm. He wandered around the office in his last few weeks there with no work to do, because no one wanted anything to do with him. It was a funny episode, to some extent, because it was about the most graphic episode I had ever witnessed that ended up getting someone not hired. However, this man's example points out something that is all too common. The summer associate did what many other people commonly do in the workplace; he made the mistake of introducing "fatal friction" into his relationship with his employer, and this made it difficult (and eventually impossible) for him to continue working for the employer. The introduction of "fatal friction" is among the most damaging and harmful things that can happen to you in your career.

By *fatal friction* I mean creating a situation that is so troublesome that going forward in the future you are never going to be

trusted, never going to be respected, or always have difficulty relating to people on the job. Just like so many other people, I too have been guilty of this sort of thing.

When I left my first law firm to go to a second one, a couple of partners in the law firm tried to get me to stay. One day one of the partners stopped by my office and asked me why I was leaving. He was someone I had had a little bit of anger towards, because he was married and having an affair with one of my coworkers at the time. He was also favoring her with the sort of work he was giving out, and overlooking her mistakes.

"There is no reason you should be leaving here. Why are you leaving?" he asked me.

I said something I will never forget and he would not either:

"Better work, better money and a better firm," I told him.

"Ok," he said, and he smiled and walked away.

A year and a half later I was working at another [law firm](#), and I asked the law firm I had previously resigned from if I could come back. They said I could and I was planning on doing so. When this guy found out that I was planning on coming back he raised a big stink and was very upset about the prospect of me returning. He told all of the partners in the law firm about what I had said when I left. Just by repeating to the other partners what I had said back then, the partner had introduced a "fatal friction" into the situation, which ended up ruining the prospect of me returning to the firm.

I have had people quit our company, and in the process, conduct themselves horribly. Then, for years later, I receive calls and emails from other companies that are interviewing these people for new positions. I am never sure what to say about these people because they created all sorts of tension at the end of my working relationship with them.

"Would you hire this person again?" they always ask.

"I want to tell you about what a great job this person did on a certain project, and how much a coworker of mine respected the work they did," I might say. I will then launch into a 15-minute monologue about something I like about the person. I have learned that it is never a good idea to say bad things about other people because it can come back and bite you. I always try to say nice things about people. I look for the good, but admittedly, this is not easy to do under all circumstances. Nevertheless, when someone creates "fatal tension" in their workplace, it is never a good thing. I had to learn this lesson the hard way in my life.

Several years ago, I was out for a dinner in New York City with a man, his wife, and a few other people I knew. As we started talking, the man mentioned that he had grown up in the same town I did. We started discussing different people that we knew. Then he mentioned someone that I knew that had put me in a very uncomfortable situation on one occasion. I had been over at his house and he had come on to me. When he asked me if I knew the person, I said something to the effect of: "I sure do. Did he invite you over to his house and come on to you too?" Since we were sharing stories about various people at the time, I did not think I had done anything all that bad.

The table went silent, and I sort of looked around, unaware of what was occurring.

"What's wrong?" I asked. I did not understand why the table had suddenly gotten so quiet.

"He's my younger brother," the man said.

I was absolutely stunned. I did not know what to do. While the situation I described had in fact occurred, I had done something that would forever create *fatal tension* between this man and myself. A couple of years later this man had risen to a position of significant power and influence in the industry I was in, and because of what I had said at dinner that one time, I never was in a position to ask for his assistance with anything.

You can never be happy and you can never achieve what you are capable of if you are constantly in conflict with others. If you offend others, you can never be as successful as you are capable of being, or live the life you are capable of living. Friction is the worst possible thing that you can create in your relationships. When you create friction, you make it impossible for things to work out the way they can for you and, instead, you make it impossible for things to work out.

- Have you ever been in a situation wherein you did something that upset people?
- Have you ever known someone who seems to make mistakes and upset people everywhere they go?

I have known people who cannot drive down the street without getting angry with people and occasionally yelling at other cars. I've known people who go into most social situations and get angry about one person or another. I know people who go to work and always get angry with their bosses for one reason or another. There are people out there who are always in conflict about one thing or another, and who are always introducing tension into virtually every situation they get into.

It is impossible to reach your full potential if you are introducing tension into your situation. Tension, feeling threatened, insulting others and more are all things that will hold you back to an incredible degree in everything you ever do. In your career, it is extremely important that you not only avoid creating *fatal friction*, but you also avoid the sorts of people that do. I review the résumés of people every day and speak with people who have been moving between various jobs for years, creating tension with one employer after another. Many people do this in their personal relationships as well. You will never reach your full potential as long as you are introducing this sort of friction into your career and the people in your life.

You need to move through life and your career doing everything you can to avoid introducing fatal friction between you and others.

THE LESSON

"Fatal Friction" can inconspicuously infiltrate your relationships, then wreck your career and future career prospects. Accidental or unintentional remarks can generate "Fatal Friction", which in turn generates tensions with the people around you and prohibits you from achieving your full potential. In your career and in life, you must do everything possible to avoid fatal friction between yourself and others.