

# The Law Firm Culture of Abuse



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*Professional growth for attorneys cannot occur amid an atmosphere of intimidation and conflict.*

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When interviewing attorneys for associate positions at our firm, we noticed a disturbing trend. Candidate after candidate claimed the main reason for the job search was to escape the abuse suffered at the hands of senior supervising attorneys. Both junior and accomplished attorneys from firms large and small made the same complaint. They were tired of being yelled at, belittled and verbally abused.

There is something very wrong with a profession in which the main gripe of its junior members is that its experienced members are—as a group—loud, out of control and given to emotional swings. As one young attorney put it, “I hated going to work and not knowing what kind of mood my boss would be in.” Another associate expressed it a different way: “You are entitled to criticize my work product, but don’t attack me personally.”

## Reluctant Confessions

Such sentiments are not always immediately forthcoming; they usually are preceded by a statement to the effect that the job hunter is hard-working and diligent. The fear is that stating the true reason for leaving will be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness or laziness. The truth is that such revelations are a sign the profession has lost its manners.

The law is a jealous mistress. From the first day of law school we are all aware that most lawyers put in more hours and are subject to greater demands than those who choose other careers. These facts, however, are no excuse for mistreatment of younger, less experienced associates. The law firm culture of abuse must be eliminated.

Of course, we do not contend that a new attorney cannot be criticized for performing in an unprofessional manner. If an associate turns in sloppy and incomplete assignments, shows up late to court or to meetings, or fails to respond to a client’s needs, action must be taken.

If the associate does not have the ability or talent to succeed in the particular firm, the situation should be discussed and evaluated in a professional manner. An associate who cannot make the grade should be dismissed, but not abused.

The problem of abuse raises some broad questions. Is the trend a product of the increasing lack of civility in society as a whole or is it peculiar to attorneys? Does it have its beginnings in the brutal Socratic method used by some law school

professors to provide lawyers with thick skins? Is it a result of the adversarial system in which we are taught to hone our verbal skills?

Or are abusive attorneys’ egos so inflated by their own personal success that they feel entitled to kick around less powerful members of the profession? Do they feel that lawyers who pay their dues are then entitled to abuse lower-ranking professionals?

Last year the Boston Bar Association released a report on professional fulfillment that concluded associates at large firms were the most dissatisfied of the groups studied. While their complaints were varied, some associates complained of a cycle of abuse in which partners who were poorly treated as associates later became the abusers. The associates believed the firms tolerated the situation because the partners were economically valuable.

Maybe this dissatisfaction is spurring the increase in the number of young attorneys who change jobs early in their careers. A recent study by the National Association for Law Placement shows 43 percent of more than 10,000 associates studied left their firms after the third year of practice. Retention of new lawyers will become increasingly difficult until significant changes are made.

## A Need to Acknowledge the Problem

There is no simple solution, but there is a first step that can be taken: The profession must acknowledge the problem of abuse.

Lately, much attention has been given to the issues of how to train and mentor junior associates, but they are secondary to the issue of creating a healthy law firm environment. No meaningful experience or growth on a professional level can take place if the atmosphere is one of fear, intimidation and personal conflict.

Each attorney deserves to be treated with dignity and respect regardless of his or her experience level. As a profession we have a high level of education. We must begin by acting as educated people when dealing with associates, reacting calmly and rationally, not viscerally and abusively. Only then can we hold ourselves out to society as an honorable profession. ■

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