Groups and Their Norms Determine the Outcome of Our Lives

By *Harrison Barnes*

Several years ago, I was working at a law firm and I started to hear about and notice something extremely unusual. There was a certain partner who seemed to have a profound ability to destroy the legal careers of people she worked with. I started to hear all sorts of stories about people who had worked for this partner in the past and what had become of them:

- One girl had walked away from her legal career to become a waitress.
- Another guy had quit working in the law firm and took a job in a car stereo store.
- One formerly clean-cut guy had grown a beard, moved to a cabin in the middle of California somewhere, and given up work.

These were people who formerly had extremely bright futures. They went to the best law schools, seemed to be solid and well-rounded individuals, and their "falls" were so dramatic that they became legendary in the firm I was working in.

Here is what happened to these people:

From what I understood, the woman partner would take an attorney "under her wing" and for the first few months of their working relationship, everything would go very well. The partner would eventually monopolize all of the attorney's time and work, and pretty soon the attorney would only be working for her. The two would form a close working relationship, and the older attorney would begin calling the attorney at home frequently to talk about work, her private life, and more. The calls would become more frequent and the need for out of work attention would increase.

Invariably, something would go wrong. The young attorney might, for example, stop answering the phone on weekends when not working on an important project. The young attorney might be asked to comment on a personal situation in the partner's personal life and the older attorney would not like the answer.

Regardless of what happened, after three to six months, the young attorney's relationship with the partner would rapidly and almost instantly go south. The partner would turn vicious toward the younger attorney, become incredibly critical of their work, and eventually stop talking to them and giving them work. The partner would then badmouth the younger attorney to all of the other partners in the firm. Other partners would refuse to give the young attorney work. If someone did give the young attorney work, the partner would turn very political and start creating problems for the person who gave the young attorney work. Because the woman partner was somewhat powerful (and feared), no one would give the young attorney work.

For weeks or months, the young attorney would sit there ostracized and not be given any assignments. Confused, the attorney would start to have profound feelings of self-doubt about their abilities. They would not be fired—just completely ostracized.

I only witnessed this occur with one attorney (the whole process took at least six months); however, I saw the attorney completely disintegrate before my eyes. Their appearance began to change, their face aged, and many visible signs of physical and psychological stress started to appear.

At some point, the young attorneys would start looking for a new job. They had no references to speak of at their current firm (no one would help them). Their self-confidence had been negatively impacted from months of ostracism. When they told the interviewing firms about having no work, this was a huge "danger sign" in the eyes of potential employers. Eventually, most of these attorneys just left the firm with no job.

After leaving, they would still try to get a job but would find that they had been effectively ostracized by the legal community. When a firm considering hiring the attorney would call their former firm, the references were never good. Despite having not been fired, future firms believed the attorney had been fired.

When I started my career as a legal recruiter, I started seeing resumes that made no sense from people at my former law firm. When you see someone who was formerly making $150,000 a year, went to Yale for college, and then attended law school at UCLA working as a waitress—it raises serious concerns. I spoke with four or five people who formerly worked for this woman over the course of the next several years and all of them had similar stories. One spent two hours over a lunch telling me about working for this woman and was still visibly shaken by the experience years after having left the firm.

Eventually, the partner was fired. However, from what I understood, this dynamic she had with younger attorneys and her fellow partners had been playing itself out for more than a decade. I have no idea how many careers ended up being harmed by this woman. I personally witnessed one attorney almost be driven insane by the woman before he quit. Watching his quick demise was instructive for me on many levels, and I have often thought about it throughout the years.

If one person (or group of people) can so quickly destroy a formerly very bright career, what sorts of lessons can be derived from this?

All the self-help-related advice in the world cannot change the fact that there are certain groups and dynamics out there that simply must be avoided. The dynamic this woman set up at her law firm had a very negative impact on the lives of many people. This dynamic is important and significant because without it, the lives of these people would in all likelihood have turned out differently.

If you are not where you want to be in your life, how much of this is due to the dynamics of the groups you have been involved in, the people you spend your time with, and more?

The people you associate with and spend your time with will determine the outcome and quality of your life. Your friends, family, coworkers, and everyone else will all work together to create a certain type of life for you—either happy or unhappy.

To take an extreme example, if you were a Jew in Nazi Germany in the early 1940s, you would have been in serious

trouble. It does not matter how smart you were or how talented you were. You were part of an irrational group dynamic that was completely destructive to your emotional and physical health. Being Jewish in Germany at this point in time was just not a good thing. You were in the wrong group. If you were Jewish in the early 1940s in Germany, the best thing you could do was get out of there.

Every single one of us needs and wants connection in our lives. There are very few people on the earth who can function without connection to other people. This connection we are seeking is hardwired within most of us. Occasionally, you hear about someone like Ted Kaczynski (the Unabomber) who spends their lives living apart from others in the middle of nowhere. However, people like this are so rare that they are a huge exception. Work is a connection. Our family is a connection. Our friends are a connection. The quality of these connections and the messages they have for us are extremely important.

One of the most important components of families, companies, and the people you associate with is their belief in what the "norm" is. It is the norm that you and the people around you accept that determines the quality of your life and career, as well as what ends up happening to you.

- In the law firm I was working in, the norm was to ostracize attorneys the woman partner had chewed up and spit out. This is not a healthy sort of norm. In most law firms, because of the norm and group dynamics of this norm, I do not believe that this sort of thing would have been allowed to occur with regularity—if at all.
- In Nazi Germany in the early 1940s, the norm was to put Jews in concentration camps, kill Jews, deprive them of property, and so forth. This is not a healthy "norm". In most countries, because of the "norm" and government, this sort of thing would not be allowed to occur.

Your beliefs about what is normal and what the groups you associate with believe is normal, has a key influence on your behavior and the course and direction of your life and career. The groups you spend time with can shape what the "norm" is for you as well.

Everywhere you turn--whether in families, schools, companies, or friendships--there are norms of acceptable behavior for people. Some of these norms are achievement- and success-oriented. Other norms are degenerative and harmful in nature. Which norms dominate your life? What are the norms of the groups you are associating with?

All throughout high school, all of my friends and I chewed tobacco. I was in Michigan and a group of ten or so of us all chewed tobacco. It seemed to us to be the most normal thing in the world and we all enjoyed it. We chewed tobacco between classes. We chewed tobacco after class. We chewed tobacco during sports practice. We chewed tobacco pretty much all the time. I thought everyone my age chewed tobacco.

When I entered college at the University of Chicago, to my astonishment I did not meet or know anyone for at least the first few months who chewed tobacco. In fact, I could not even find any place to buy chewing tobacco around campus. I could not believe the sorts of kids I was meeting in college did not chew tobacco.

I was amazed. I thought kids my age everywhere chewed tobacco. Within a few weeks of arriving at school, I stopped chewing tobacco all the time. It was simply the "norm" of the sorts of kids I was now around and associating with. This group ended up shaping my behavior.

The norms you hold will determine the mental peace, happiness, and satisfaction you have in your life. These norms will be shaped by the people you spend your time with and associate with. The norms of someone who is part of a violent gang are going to be much different from those of someone who is actively volunteering for a church. Different types of behavior simply produce different mental results for us.

Consider what is "normal" in various families:

- **In many families, it is "normal" to eat a large dessert after dinner**--If you believe that eating a huge dessert is common, you will probably associate with others who do this, do the same yourself, and may end up fat. You will subconsciously give yourself to eat all you want.
- **In other families, it is "normal" to sit around and smoke cigarettes and watch television after dinner**--If you believe this sort of behavior is common, you will feel comfortable associating with other people doing this, may think nothing evil of doing it yourself, and may end up dead from lung cancer.
- **In other families, it is "normal" to sit around having numerous drinks after dinner**--If you believe this is common, you will feel comfortable drinking every night, being around other people who do, and your life will be affected by what occurs as a result of this.
- **In other families, it is "normal" for everyone to read together after dinner**--If you believe this is common, you will probably continually be interested in ideas and knowledge, seek out others like this, and see the world in this way.
- **In other families, it is "normal" for everyone to disappear after dinner and go their separate ways**--If you believe this is common, you will come to value your free time and relationships with others on a different plane than you do with your family.
- **In other families, it is "normal" for everyone to get in arguments and fight about nothing at dinner**--If you believe this is common, you will be quick to snap at people and may start viewing fighting as a sign of love. You may end up with a life dominated by arguments, drama, and turmoil.
- **In other families, it is "normal" for everyone to share stories about their day at dinner and receive constructive feedback from other family members**--If you believe this is common, you will likely come to highly value communication with your family and expect this in your interpersonal relationships as well.

I have listed so many examples above because everyone experiences a different version of "normal" at home—and in all areas of their lives. What you consider normal and what you consider acceptable will determine the outcome of your life. What the groups you associate with consider normal and acceptable will also determine the quality of your life.

When it comes to the groups of people you are associating with, it is extremely important that you ask: "What is the norm of this group?" Whether you like it or not, group norms will have a massive influence over your own life. You need to seek out groups with norms that will enrich you and not harm you. Groups and their norms are one of the most powerful forces determining the outcome of our lives.

THE LESSON

One of the most important aspects of the people around you is their definition of the "norm"; norms of acceptable behavior exist everywhere. Your own definitions of normal and acceptable will determine your success in life, as will those of the groups with whom you interact. Develop an understanding of the norms for the many groups in your life.