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DIVERSITY | IN ACTION

Perspective

Use it to **temper** your **reactions** to others or if your **accent** is disparaged.

BY KATHERINE FRINK-HAMLETT

I was greatly looking forward to starting my first year at a prestigious New York law firm until I found out that one of the partners I worked with as a summer associate recently left the firm. Our relationship was fantastic: My assignments were challenging, the partner provided meaningful guidance and I fully expected to be working with this individual as a first-year associate. Now, I feel disappointed and betrayed.

On several occasions, the partner indicated interest in working with me and as a Latino male, the main reason why I selected this firm was especially because of this partner. As soon as I began working with this attorney, I immediately knew that if I received an offer, I would accept without hesitation.

Although I enjoyed working with other partners within the firm, this one in particular made my summer associate experience extremely valuable since it's rare to work with a partner of color.

I never expected that this individual would just up and leave and now I am reconsidering whether I should move forward or go to another firm. How could this person leave without letting me know? I feel betrayed and left out on limb—what should I do?

First, get over yourself. You have confused so-called betrayal with your misplaced sense of entitlement.

Did you really expect that this partner would pick up the phone and call some random summer associate to advise of an imminent departure? Or better yet, perhaps the partner should have declined the next opportunity since your arrival was expected.

I can appreciate your disappointment since as a person of color, the opportunities to work with partners of color who value your talent and can aid in your career development are extremely limited. However, the betrayal drama is deeply troubling.

Next, you should realize that your cup runneth over.

If you decide to move forward, you'll be associated with an excellent firm with a stellar reputation, particularly in your chosen practice group. Additionally,



PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK KOPSTEIN

don't lose sight of the relationship you've developed with a partner that you admire and presumably, respect.

Just because the partner is no longer at the firm doesn't mean that the relationship is over. It's different—but it can (and should) continue nonetheless.

It's your choice: You can choose to be a crybaby or a professional. Choose the former and you'll cry alone; choose the latter and you'll learn how to effectively manage the many permutations of your career.

Your next step is to send a handwritten note congratulating the partner on this new opportunity. Within the note, indicate your appreciation for a rewarding summer and mention that you look forward to staying in touch. The note should contain all of your professional and personal contact information including e-mail addresses

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and a mobile telephone number.

Within three to six months, follow up with the partner to check in on this new position and bring him or her up to date on your professional development. As your practice experience matures, you should plan to attend events where the partner may be speaking or, perhaps, also in attendance.

Eventually, you will create a valuable professional and personal relationship. Wouldn't that be a far better result than harboring unproductive feelings of betrayal and bitterness?

Finally, recognize that institutions are constantly changing, mostly without your consent or input. Learn to adapt—quickly; otherwise, you'll be in a constant state of anxiety based on the unfounded notion that you are owed consistency.

Partners move, law firms merge, practices grow (some decline), billing structures are modified and so on and so on. Whether you seek a new opportunity with a different firm, attempt to follow the partner who left, or move forward with your current position, you will invariably face the ongoing and oftentimes exhilarating dynamic called "change." I wish you well.

I grew up and was primarily educated in China. I received my undergraduate and law degrees in China and worked as a corporate associate there as well. My LL.M. degree is from an American law school.

Over the summer, I worked on a temporary assignment with a mid-sized New York law firm and was mainly hired for my Mandarin language proficiency. The firm's corporate practice is extremely busy so I was offered a position as a first-year associate which I eagerly accepted.

Recently, one of the junior associates made a comment about my accent and

suggested that I "work on it." What's ironic is that the comment was made by a Chinese-American who grew up in America and was educated here as well, so even though the associate can speak some Cantonese, this individual is essentially American to me. In fact, we can't even speak to each other in Chinese since I speak Mandarin and the associate knows just a little Cantonese. We can only communicate in English.

Is this person correct? Should I be concerned about my accent? Is this going to be a problem for me?

It depends. If an accent renders someone incomprehensible then clearly it's problematic since it impairs the communication process. In your specific situation, I would take the comment with a raised eyebrow since it is highly doubtful that you would have received an offer as a full-time associate if there was an actual or perceived communication issue.

Accents—like gender, race and ethnicity—conjure up different stereotypical images.

When one hears the British accent one image immediately comes to mind, whereas a Chinese accent will create a separate and distinct impression. And again—like gender, race and ethnicity—some accents are placed higher on the food chain than others; some are viewed as colorful—others are viewed as guttural. (I'll let you figure out which is which and the relative order.)

Further, accents are mostly defined in reference to the speaker's geographical location. For example, no matter where I land, I am black and female. However, when I travel abroad, I have an American accent but when I'm here in New York (smile)—I'm as clear as a bell.

In any event, it gets dicey when people confuse accents with intelligence

and ability. Some Americans tend to mistakenly think that speaking with an accent somehow erases competency.

Again, it bears repeating that not all accents are viewed equally. So while the French accent may generate notions of fine cheeses and romance, the Ghanaian accent may leave a totally different impression. This phenomenon sometimes creeps into the law firm setting as well.

Certainly, there are people who claim to speak English and whose sole language is allegedly English but who are nevertheless completely incomprehensible since they couldn't speak a grammatically correct sentence if you paid them. On the flip side, there are intelligent people, several of whom are attorneys, who have mastered English as a second, third or even a fourth language but have retained an accent.

As long as communication can take place without a struggle, a so-called accent should be completely neutral.

Attorneys with hiring authority clearly understand you so your colleague may be overly sensitive to your accent. Simply communicate to be understood, accent and all. Congratulations and continued success!

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