

Business & Careers

Departing on bad terms never a wise decision

LeBron James' triumphant return a lesson for law firms



David Namkung
The Headhunter

In the world of sports, we witnessed one of the most dramatic NBA Finals in recent history when LeBron James led the Cleveland Cavaliers to their unprecedented comeback victory and first professional sports title for the city of Cleveland in 52 years in June.

This triumph would not have happened but for the return of “King James,” Cleveland’s prodigal son, and so this tale can serve as a reminder to law firm managing partners and hiring professionals of the importance of fireproofing (or in this case, rebuilding) bridges with previous employees.

As many will know, Dan Gilbert, lawyer and billionaire founder of Quicken Loans and the owner of the Cavaliers and James originally parted ways on public and bad terms, reminiscent of Wayne Gretzky’s departure from the Edmonton Oilers. Free agent James infamously announced that he was leaving the Cavaliers—the team that had drafted him into the league—on a television special dubbed *The Decision*, by proclaiming that he was going to “take [his] talents to South Beach and join the Miami Heat.”

The Cavaliers were informed of this “decision” only minutes before the show began. Understandably, Gilbert was incensed and so penned an open letter response about James’ “cowardly betrayal” and made one of the worst sports prophesies of all time, predicting that the Cavaliers would win a championship before James would in Miami (James would go on to clinch two championships with Miami while the Cavaliers failed to make the playoffs).

That open letter came to define Gilbert as an owner, which he admits is one of the worst decisions he has made. Eventually, Gilbert apologized for his actions. He flew alone to James’ home, sat across from him, and the two men hashed it out. James reportedly also expressed regret about *The Decision*, and the two were able to mend their personal and professional relationships.

There are several applicable



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First, firms ought to carefully consider how they treat their departing lawyers and alumni — alumni are among the most important stakeholders for law firms and are instrumental in talent recruitment, client referrals and a firm’s overall reputation in the community. Moreover, you might have a “LeBron James” or two in your alumni base, lawyers who could make a pivotal impact on your organization, and if the bridge is still standing, might ultimately think of returning with an even larger book of business or becoming a client as general counsel of a major organization, both of which would prove to be impressive and demonstrable endorsements of your firm.

Many firms devote significant resources to their alumni relations to actively engage their alumni through efforts such as newsletters that highlight the successes of departed lawyers, hosting regular alumni events, and others even have staff devoted to alumni relations. For smaller firms, though you may not have the same resources as an international organization, your list of alumni is likely smaller in scale so you may actually be able to tailor more intimate and targeted initiatives.

Second, in order to maximize

positive relationships with alumni, your off-boarding process should be tactful and respectful. Gilbert has lamented how his regrettable letter would end up defining him as an owner — “You can do 999 out of 1,000 things right, and one wrong thing is who you become...”

Even if your firm has treated a departed lawyer exceptionally well for 30-plus years, their overall experience could be defined by how they are off-boarded because this process is indicative of a law firm’s culture—once a lawyer provides notice, some law firms immediately start severing relations (literally locking out their former team members) while others host congratulatory parties.

But for exceptional circumstances, your firm’s off-boarding practices should not come as a surprise to departing lawyers. On a practical level, it should be a process that takes into account the immediate risks associated with the departing lawyer, their reasons for leaving and their destination. Most importantly, your process should be consistent, proactive and strategic to ensure it is insulated from petty knee-jerk reactions.

Third, it is never too late to

remedy relationships; even publicly charred bridges can be repaired, as evidenced by Gilbert, particularly if the right people are involved. It can be assumed that James would not have returned to the Cavaliers if Gilbert hadn’t reached out to him. This took self-awareness and a good dose of humility—before that fateful meeting, the two hadn’t spoken for four years despite crossing paths at games. However, Gilbert likely had some help reconnecting with James from Rich Paul, James’ 34-year-old super-agent and long-time friend who is based in Cleveland. Paul, James’ confidant, also had a vested interest in bringing James back to his home state and it is understood that he played a key role in facilitating the discussion.

If there appears to be a gulf between your firm and a departed lawyer, consider which mutual connections could serve to rebuild the relationship. This mutual connection may in fact be your trusted recruiter. We have successfully assisted numerous law firms revive relations with and even recruit their alumni by making discreet inquiries to gauge interest in reconnecting with former employers. The first call is often the most critical and most difficult step to take, so if circumstances preclude you from calling directly, consider who else might be able to help you bridge the gap.

What are your alumni saying about your firm? How are you treating them on their way out? Not every departure can be amicable, but don’t add fuel to the fire by allowing egos and emotions to off-track your off-boarding process. Your firm could be the one that ends up getting burned.

As the Gilbert-James legacy suggests, it can pay huge to keep bridges intact, so consider whether your firm is taking the adequate steps to maximize alumni relationships.

Even if some of your bridges are in dire need of restoration, it’s encouraging what can be built with enough humility, a common purpose and friends to facilitate the conversation.

David Namkung is a partner with The Counsel Network in Vancouver, president of the Federation of Asian Canadian Lawyers (BC Chapter) and a Board Member of WorkingGear.ca. You can follow him on Twitter @DNamkung or find him on LinkedIn.