

Finish What You Start

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

If you drive less than an hour outside of any major city in America, you will very quickly begin to see a different world. Typically, in the best neighborhoods and areas, the lawns are well maintained and there is not much to see beyond trees, flowers, and shrubs. However, when you start getting into poorer neighborhoods outside of major cities, you begin to see things like automobiles on blocks rusting in front yards and the landscape looks a lot different. I've ridden through these neighborhoods with wealthy people from larger cities. At least once I heard someone say something like, "Why don't they clean up that mess?"

I know exactly why they do not clean up that mess because I have some family members who live in the country who also collect vehicles on their front lawns and behind their homes. They do not clean the mess up because they are in the middle of trying to restore and fix those various vehicles. There is a story to every car and [truck](#) that is in a state of disrepair. One needs a new transmission and will be fixed soon. Another needs some complicated engine work. Most of the cars were purchased on a whim and for cheap when they were already broken. Everyone believes they will one day fix the car or truck and when they do, they are going to make some good money off of it.

It is almost as if the unfinished car or truck gives the person who owns it value. It makes them feel as if they are important because they have some untapped wealth or power of which they've not taken advantage. Isn't this how many of us are in our own lives? We have untapped power of which we've not taken advantage, and we've started things we have not completed.

One evening, I was at a mall and saw a poster [advertising](#) surgery for women to lose weight. I saw the most stunning before and after pictures. A woman was at least 350 pounds and so large you could hardly make out her face. After the surgery, she had lost about 200 pounds. Her transformation after losing the weight was amazing. She was very attractive, and she looked much happier. What was so striking to me was the difference in potential the two pictures represented. One woman looked like a supermodel and the other could not fit into clothing you would find in an average mall. Why would someone want to pass up the incredible potential they have in their life? This is only one example of potential.

People start diets and never finish.

Others tell themselves they will start exercising and never follow through.

Others start school and never finish.

Others plan to start a business and never follow through.

Others tell themselves they will start saving and never follow through.

Others start a novel and never follow through.

Others start taking the path to a better life in one of a million ways and never follow through.

In fact, I think following through and finishing what you start is one of the most important things you can do. Why don't more people follow through? What is it about following through that scares so many? Why don't most of us finish what we start?

I know so many people with so much potential who could be incredible artists, [lawyers](#), [programmers](#), businesspeople, and more who never complete what they start. I know people who are chronically unemployed because they never finish what they start. I can think of whole groups of people I know of who are brilliant and talented but have lives of complete mediocrity because they never finish what they start.

Before you read any further, I want to make sure you are aware of one thing: *the only thing separating the people with the most important and meaningful lives from those who have average lives or fail is that the latter don't finish what they start.*

When I was practicing law, I remember being at a cocktail party with numerous partners and associates from the [law firm](#) where I worked. One of the associates was joking with the partner that the law firm had only made two partners in the entire 14 years it had been in Los Angeles. The partner looked at the associate and said, "That's because you guys get too scared you will not make partner and always leave before we have a chance to nominate and vote on you."

I thought that was an interesting statement because, regardless of the truth of it, the partner was saying that no one who worked there ever followed through by staying on the job. They got too scared and left. Perhaps those associates went somewhere they were positive they would make partner. The thought of all of those careers that were stalled by not following through was an interesting one to me. Maybe those associates like to say to themselves, "I would have made partner if I stayed around, but I did not like it so I left." I don't know. However, what I do know is this situation is not much different from those people whose personal worth is tied to the fact that if they fixed up the cars on their front lawns, they would have a lot of money. If only.

Once you go inside the homes with cars rusting in front of them on blocks you will see additional projects that are half finished. You will see a bathroom that is being remodeled, and that has been for a long time. For years, the family may have been taking a shower in a bathroom where there is no tile on the floor. This epidemic is not just confined to rural areas. It also exists in cities. People do not collect cars on their front lawns in cities because the police and authorities in these areas don't allow it. Go inside many homes in cities and suburbs and you will also see a huge collection of unfinished projects.

I want to be clear about something with these unfinished projects: it is not just about the money. You can tile the average bathroom with inexpensive tile for less than \$30. You can rebuild a transmission quite inexpensively if you know what you are doing. It just takes time.

My mother is someone who was always attracted to dreamers and she dated a lot of them while I was growing up. These

were men who always told her tomorrow was going to be far different from today. They were on the verge of getting rich, they were going to build a house on the water, something was going to change and change soon. My mother had relatives all over Michigan who did things like drive trucks and work in factories in the country, but she had a small house in a nice suburb. The whole outlook of never finishing what you started came right into our house with these men who were dreamers. Most of them were contractors or were involved in contracting, and they would start one project after another and keep the projects going for years. One project might involve replacing the kitchen floor. A few hours would be dedicated to ripping up the floor on a Sunday and a few years would pass before a new floor was installed. For years we would get splinters and eat in a kitchen with no floor.

In the interim, they'd start numerous other projects. None of these would be completed, either.

What was the meaning of all of these projects left incomplete? Why did so many things consistently not get done? What was happening?

The answers to these questions are complicated. However, I believe a large part of it is a desire not to be held accountable for the result. If the kitchen remodel is completed, we will have to call the result our kitchen. If all of the cars are fixed, we will have to explain why we do not have any money. If we finish college, we will have to be accountable for getting a [high-paying job](#).

How many people have you met who have started a novel and never finished it? Almost everyone knows someone like this. Have they not finished the novel because they do not know how to write? Have they really had writers' block for the past eight years? The legions of people with unfinished novels are legendary. I think so many of these novels go unfinished because if they did finish them, the person will have to come to terms with the fact they are not the next great novelist or they are not as important as they would like to believe they are deep down.

Many of us want to represent ourselves as something other than what we are. Finishing what we start forces us to confront who we really are. So we are afraid to finish what we start. This brings me to you and your job. Do you finish what you start? I have supervised and worked with hundreds of people over my career, and the number one characteristic I have seen in the very best people is they finish what they start.

Finishing what you start is the most important thing you can do in any job. The people you are working for need to know whatever work you are given you will finish. Every week for the past several years I have had a series of teleconferences with various individual employees in my company. The purpose of these teleconferences is to solicit various ideas about our businesses, to go over projects that have been assigned, and to assign new projects. They are the most effective method I know for making our company strong, ensuring the continual promotion of the good people, and pressuring the average people in the company to "shape up or ship out." These teleconferences are simple and there is really nothing to them but ensuring that people finish what they start. I believe that cycles of action and finishing what we start are the most important things that can happen in any company.

Several years ago, before I conducted these weekly teleconferences, I found most of the projects I assigned never ended up getting completed by certain people. It was a constant source of anger for me when things did not get completed, and after a while, I would simply give up on them.

The typical teleconference goes like this: we start going over the assignments for the current week and explaining them. Then we go over the assignments for the previous weeks and the person with the assignments provides an update. The spreadsheet may look like this:

Assignment Weeks

Write a letter to all previous EC clients re: sale 7

Call Franchise Tax Board re: new tax ID number 7

Certain employees never have any task go more than one or two weeks, and others have their assignments open for months at a time. The people who complete tasks are the people who remain at the company and work there year after year. In the past, I have hired people from other great companies, great schools, and people with a lot of "flash" who could never complete an assignment.

I have also hired others who did not look as good on paper but who always finished an assignment. Our company has no venture capital or borrowed money and must support itself with real revenues. In our company, the only thing that really matters is whether or not projects are completed. If a project is not completed, our company does not make any money. I believe the downfall of many companies begins when there are more people not finishing tasks than finishing them. There are people who are in the habit of not finishing what they start. The same employees who do not finish what they start are often the people who have the most doctors' appointments and waste the most time during the day. They spend their time in a nonproductive zone. I do not judge people who do this because I am also guilty to a certain extent of not always finishing what I start. The fact of the matter is, however, the way to do the absolute best in your job and life is to make sure you always finish what you start no matter what.

When you do not finish what you start at work, you are sending the message the task and the company are not important enough to you. If you do enough of this in the business world, people will stop taking you seriously. People do not have confidence in those who do not finish what they start. Companies do not promote people who do not finish what they start.

Everyone, regardless of who they are, must be accountable for finishing projects. When Hillary Clinton was running for president, one of the images I could not stop thinking about was when she pledged to fix the [healthcare program](#) in the United States when her husband had been president years previously. After a great deal of effort, she failed completely. I saw her at a news conference and she said something to the effect that "I do not know why anyone even tries. You cannot get anything done with these people in Washington."

To me this was a striking statement. It was striking because she had essentially "thrown in the towel" and given up. I wanted to see her succeed. After this sort of attitude, I felt it was very unlikely she could have really thrived in Washington. For example, when Al Gore lost the run for president, he kept fighting for his belief in fixing the environment--even without public office. I wonder what Hillary Clinton would do with healthcare reform if she were not in office. My feeling is not a lot.

Finishing what you start says a lot about your character and leaves a huge and lasting impression on everyone around you. It is extremely important you are always finishing what you start. The results you will have in the world and the impact you will make will be in direct proportion to your ability to finish. Everyone can finish what they start if they really put their minds to it.

The rewards for completing what you start are huge. When you complete what you start, you learn about your capabilities. You learn lessons you can use to take the next step and grow.

I believe most people will do a lot more to avoid pain than they will to experience pleasure. For many people, completing a task may represent the potential for being criticized or judged for something, which is painful. People want to avoid pain. Success, however, could be compared to creating constant failure and forcing yourself to grow in response. If you finish a task and do not believe what you have done is good enough, then you will learn lessons that will drive you forward to do as good as possible the next time. The important thing is that you finished. Growth only happens when you are completing tasks.

THE LESSON

People with meaningful lives finish what they start. This says a lot about their character, and leaves a lasting impression on those around them. Completing the tasks you are assigned will make you the kind of person that companies retain year after year, and will help you better assess your capabilities. You must be accountable for finishing your projects and you can do so by putting your mind to it. When you always finish what you start, you will find yourself performing at your absolute best.

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