

Prank Phone Calls, Accountability and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was growing up, like many kids my age, my friends and I discovered the joys of making prank phone calls. We never did anything all that serious. We might call a girl from our class and talk in a funny voice, for example.

The most serious phone call we ever made was ordering a pizza for our neighbor and watching the pizza man argue with him when he arrived. That was funny. When the neighbor refused the pizza, we went and bought it from the pizza man when he was getting in his car—so the prank was not all that serious but it was still great fun.

One day I had a babysitter over watching a friend and myself while we were making prank phone calls. I could not have been in more than sixth grade at the time. She seemed amused by our phone calls and decided to get in on the action.

"Here, let me show you how this is done," she said. She seemed pretty excited and seemed to be bumbling with enthusiasm. She grabbed a phone book from the kitchen and started looking for people to call.

"If you call a number and a woman answers you can be pretty sure her husband is at work," she said. "Then you can say all sorts of things about him and the wife will believe you."

I was not sure what she was up to but over the next 30 minutes or so she made some of the most shocking prank phone calls I had ever heard. For example, she called two separate women and claimed that she was calling from the hospital and their husbands had been "seriously injured" in an accident. She called another woman and spoke with her for around 10 minutes about the fact that she was having an affair with her husband.

This was before the days of *69 (to return phone calls) or caller ID, so these were some really sadistic and savage phone calls she made. Following the phone calls, she would call back and scream "it was a joke!" and then slam down the phone; however, despite alerting people that she had been joking her prank phone calls just did not seem right. After watching her do her prank phone calls, I lost interest in doing them myself. They just did not seem right.

I was not sure what was so offensive about the prank phone calls; however, the more I thought about it the more I realized that what was so upsetting was their complete "anonymity". The thrill of a prank phone call is the fact that no one knows who you are and you can do and say anything that you want. For many people, this idea is extremely exciting in many respects because they can say what they ordinarily would not say when someone is around.

When I started practicing law, online "chat boards" and gossip sites for associates started to emerge. Attorneys would go on these chat sites anonymously and chat about random things day after day. They would say nasty things about each other, their supervisors, their employers and others.

I never understood these sorts of sites (although I run one myself called Judget) and the interest people have in talking about others anonymously. These anonymous conversations almost seem, in my estimation, based on a desire to not be accountable for our actions. In my opinion the people most interested in speaking anonymously and acting anonymously are the people who are most interested in not being accountable for the things they do.

A funny story involves the Founder of a site called Infirmination.com (now part of FindLaw) and his history as a prank caller. I have met this person and spoken with him extensively. This attorney was working at a law firm called Cadwalader in New York and was not enjoying practicing law too much. One day he discovered how to "hack in" to the firm phone system and change his bosses' voicemail greetings. In his best imitation of each of his bosses, he called into the voicemail system and changed their greetings to say things like:

"This is Steven Patterson. I am currently getting a blow job from a man and cannot come to the phone right now. Please leave a message."

Or ...

"Hello, this is George Masterson. I am cheating on my wife with my secretary Linda. We are at the Plaza Hotel every Tuesday between 4:00 and 6:00 pm in a room. My wife does not know but all the people in the office do. Please leave a message."

Since most of these were uptight, patrician and very serious older heterosexual men, this did not go over well and when they traced the phone calls back to him he was summarily fired from the law firm. In response, he started the first "anonymous chat board" for attorneys that within a year or two was acquired by Westlaw.

Because he was pretty well-known back in the day, I was excited to meet him and he came to my office in Downtown Los Angeles. To my astonishment, a newspaper reporter and photographer from the *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (the local legal newspaper) showed up to take his picture and write a story about him. He had become famous for creating an anonymous forum for attorneys to write bad things about others.

Many people act far differently when they know that others are watching than when they are not being watched.

Several years ago, we had a theft problem in our office. When women would work late at night in our office, someone would go into their purse and steal money while they were in the bathroom. This happened for some time until we narrowed down the person who did it: It was an attorney who LOVED going on to chat boards and chatting anonymously. This attorney's reputation was destroyed by this one simple action.

A few years ago I was representing an attorney I knew who LOVED going on to chat boards and chatting anonymously. This was an incredibly talented attorney who was about to make partner at one of the 3 or 4 largest law firms in the country. A short time into representing him, I learned that he had been fired by the law firm because he had lied about sending a letter (which he did not) and had tried to cover his tracks later by creating the letter (on a computer system ... which is traceable)

after he said he had mailed the letter. His career was destroyed by this one simple action.

More recently, someone started making all sorts of untrue and anonymous statements about me online. These were brought to my attention and I investigated them. I discovered that these were made by someone I knew (also an attorney) who LOVED going on to chat boards and making anonymous comments when I had known them.

What is the common thread running through these statements that people are making anonymously in chat rooms and so forth? I think the common thread is that they are made by people who do not want to be accountable for their actions. They are people who take joy in being “immune” from society’s rules and constraints.

This is how people act when they are in a car and someone cuts them off. They raise their middle finger and start shouting obscenities. The car is something that allows them to not have to be accountable. Shielded by a ton of metal, a person acts in a way they never would otherwise—raising their voice and acting with a ferocity they never would in any face-to-face meeting.

Several times a day I get an email about Viagra or something along those lines spammed into my email box. I am sure that people would not come up to me personally and ask me to buy Viagra 20+ times a day. It is the anonymity of email that makes this happen.

What is happening in society with anonymous message boards, email and so forth is that people are increasingly hiding behind being unaccountable for the things that they write, say and do. When there is no accountability people can act (for the most part) without the fear of any sort of retribution from society for their actions. When we are not accountable for our actions, things break down and there are many problems.

Most supervisors in all businesses struggle to hire (and keep) people who are accountable. When they are given an assignment, the person who is accountable generally gets the work done and never makes excuses. They do not point fingers at others for something they should have done to assist them in getting the work done—they just make sure it gets done (no matter what).

Believe it or not, people who are not accountable on the job are very common. These people will seek to blame others, make excuses and rationalize why something they were asked to do is not done. People who are not accountable are found in most companies and they are a “cancer” that most companies try and eliminate but never seem to be able to. People who are accountable are always successful and always get things done.

The best people I have ever hired and worked with are also the most accountable. To my astonishment, when given incredibly difficult assignments (that I did not even think they could complete), or very tight deadlines, these people responded like this:

“Sure, it will be done.” Or ...

“I will not fail.”

I have been amazed by people like this and have seen them complete assignments that 99% of others would have found excuses for. Sometimes they stayed up all night. Other times they managed to enlist the help of others they did not even know. Other times they pulled strings and found ways to make something happen that should not have. Other times, just through sheer hard work and luck they made it happen.

This knack for being accountable and getting things done is one of the strongest skills that you can have in your job. People who are accountable are more likely to get jobs. People who are accountable are more likely to get promoted. People who are accountable are the rarest and strongest sorts of employees there are. All employers want to hire accountable people.

In my opinion, the people who hide behind the anonymity of chat boards, are most aggressive in flipping people off while driving and so forth—are often the same people who are the least accountable in their work and careers.

In my opinion, there is a crisis of accountability in our country. The government bails out banks and other institutions that fail because of bad decisions. People blame banks for lending them money when they cannot afford their homes. People lose money investing in ponzi schemes with impossibly high returns and blame someone else. We have extended our unemployment benefits to extremely long levels—instead of teaching people how to find a job. We provide huge severance packages to people who run companies and have failed.

Regardless of whether or not you want to be, you are accountable for everything that you are involved in—no matter how it turns out.

- You are accountable for the results you get in your relationships.
- You are accountable for whether or not you get or keep a job.
- You are accountable for whether or not you get a raise.
- You are accountable for your health.
- You are accountable for your children.
- You are accountable for everything you are involved in.

Not someone else. You. You are accountable.

It may sound hard to believe that you are accountable for your children—but you are. You have control over how they do and how they behave and how they turn out. I grew up with some kids whose parents were phenomenally successful as lawyers, the heads of auto companies and so forth. By the time many of these kids were 16 or so they had gone off the deep end and were into drugs, doing poorly in school or had other serious problems. Most of the parents believed that the kids were just “bad” and sent them to counselors and private schools in an effort to make someone else accountable for their children.

I remember one incident, though, that is really striking to me. One of the worst kids I knew had been kicked out of two schools and was a real troublemaker in all respects. He was absolutely horrible and out of control. I was pretty confident he would be dead, or in prison, by the time he was 20. He was so bad that even other bad kids would not spend time with him.

His father was a Harvard educated attorney and a partner at one of the largest law firms in Detroit. His father was very well known and highly regarded. One day the father decided he needed to be accountable for his son. The father took an “indefinite” leave of absence from his job and spent all day, every day with his son. He made sure he studied. He went with him to drug classes. He exercised with him. He went 100% overboard and basically dedicated his entire life and all of his

time to his son.

Within a year the son was “back on track” and doing very well. I met the boy a year later and he was a 100% different person. It was remarkable. Today the son is a successful banker.

I tell this story because to me it is an example of a parent stepping up and being accountable for their children. It is remarkable to me what can happen when we are accountable. It can not only change others lives—it can change our own.

Once you realize that you are going to have to be accountable for every single thing you are involved in—you are going to get better results in everything you do. You will also feel a real sense of accomplishment in the things you are involved in as well because you will take credit in everything that happens. You will have better relationships and you will be a happier person.

You and no one else has power over the sort of life you are living. You and no one else has this power.

What is missing in many peoples' lives is the mindset that they own the results of their action and are responsible no matter what. You too need to own the results of your actions and everything you are involved in. Other people, the environment and so forth has nothing to do with your success: You do.

- If you believe that you are accountable for your own success, I am willing to bet that you are successful.
- If you believe that other people, influences and so forth are responsible for your success then I bet you are not nearly as successful as you could be.

At some point, society switched to a place where people are not accountable and can blame others for their lot---instead of taking responsibility. You need to be 100% accountable for everything that happens to you and that you are involved in. You cannot afford not to be. Being accountable is the most important possible thing that you can do. It is going to change your career and your life.

THE LESSON

Accountability is a necessary career skill, and one that will lead you to considerable success. You are necessarily accountable, whether you want to be or not, for everything in which you are involved. You must own the results of your actions, whether they be good or bad. You are ultimately responsible for your own success, not your colleagues or environment.

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